

THE QUEEN OF TWO WORLDS.

VOL. II.

4



THE QUEEN OF TWO WORLDS

BY

LAURENCE BROOKE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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The Queen of Two Worlds.



CHAPTER XVIII.

RALPH'S HISTORY.

AT this point in his narrative, Ralph Weldon paused for an instant, and, in the gathering darkness, Helen crept nearer to him, and laid her hand within his own. Dry and prolix as the story reads upon paper, his earnest, and at certain points, electric tones, invested it with a tragic interest, and there were tears in her voice as well as in her eyes when she said—‘ My poor Ralph, how my heart bleeds for her and for you.’

His own emotion prevented him from replying to that womanly expression of compassion; but he gave to the slender fingers a pressure which was eloquent with gratitude. It would have occasioned him deep sorrow, but very little surprise, if this young girl, on whose fair life the shadows of the indiscretions of others had left no trace, and who, having so little else to be proud of, might have felt reasonable pride on the score of her birth and family, had winced ever so slightly at the knowledge of the past. That she had not exhibited one sign of repugnance or repentance from the moment in which she had learned the truth, but that, on the contrary, the story of his mother's suffering had awakened in her heart no emotions save those of an infinite compassion and tenderness, raised her to a yet greater altitude in his love and admiration, and told him that she was as superior to the petty weaknesses and the small moralising of her sex as he could have wished.

‘And had I told you all this on the night when I asked you to be my wife, you are

quite sure that it would not have turned your yes into a no ?' he said at length.

' I loved you for yourself, Ralph, and the faults of others could not, and never will, lower you in my eyes,' answered the girl in a resolute voice. ' And as for your mother, her misery paid the penalty of her error, of her fond belief in the protestations of a scoundrel. God forbid that I should cast a stone at her ! '

' Heaven bless you for those words, Helen ! ' he cried fervently, as he carried the girl's hand to his lips. ' The world may give to her what name it pleases, and assert that she had none but herself to blame for her sufferings, but to me she was as worthy of love and reverence as the purest among the pure. Her life, save for that one act of weakness, was a long record of unselfishness, devotion, and suffering ; and I humbly believe that at the great day when all are judged by One who can read the inmost secrets of the heart, her brow shall not go uncrowned.'

' Amen ! ' added Helen, solemnly. The low, thrilling tones in which those last words were uttered, seemed to give to them the

force and significance of a fervent prayer in which she must join.

There was silence between them for a few seconds, occupied by him in recovering the composure which had been so shaken by the recurrence to those bitter memories, and then he resumed his story.

‘The next day saw us on our way to the house of the man who was my father, and against whom my whole soul rose in revolt for the wrong he had done her. We had a carriage from the station to his lodge gates, and we walked arm in arm up the avenue leading to the stately Elizabethan house.

‘You must understand, Helen, that I was what is called a thoughtful boy for my years. Our lonely existence had made me fly to books, and from these grave companions I had acquired an experience, and a habit of thought, which enabled me to see deeper into things than I should have done had the circumstances of my life been different.

‘The butler opened the door, and took our names into his master. A momentary fear had crossed my mother that he might refuse to see her; but it was soon dispelled by the

entrance of the servant, who requested us to follow him. The dread of a scene might have lain at the root of this prompt reception.

‘ We were shown into the library, and for the first and last time in my life I saw the man to whom I stood in so close and hated a relationship. Never shall I forget that scene: the smallest details about him, his appearance, his attitude, his gestures, are impressed indelibly upon my memory,—the handsome, florid face, the smiling, sensual mouth, the blue eyes, which fell upon me with a cold expression of mistrust and dislike, as if he saw in me one of the scourges of his early vices, the soft, half-sneering tones as of a man who having long ago triumphed over his own emotions, had no sympathy with the emotions of others. By heaven, my blood boils as I think of all this !

‘ My mother lifted her veil, and spoke bravely and resolutely.

‘ “ I have taken this step, painful as it is,” she said to him, “ not on my own behalf, but on that of my two helpless children, whom

your cruel resolution will deprive of all hopes of a decent and happy future. This boy is your first-born—I would to heaven that I had died ere I gave him life!—and I have brought him with me, because I believe that his youth and helplessness will plead better with your heart than any appeal which I can make, founded upon the past claims I had upon you.”

‘There was a proud pathos in her voice that would have touched the most hardened. I saw his features work for a moment, and then he crossed over to me and held out his hand. I should have acted wisely by affecting an appearance of cordiality; but had I been told that life and death hung upon it, I could not so disguise my loathing that it should not be visible to him. He read it in my eyes and on my face, and, abruptly dropping the hand I had placed in his, walked back to his place.

““I shall be happy to meet your wishes as far as possible, Mabel,” he said after a pause, during which he placed for her a chair, and invited her by a gesture to seat herself on it. “But as our interview will have to be one of

a wholly business nature, would it not be better for this young gentleman to leave us a little while?"

'My mother was about to demur, but this man's presence had so sickening an effect upon me, that I was only too glad to profit by the suggestion. There was in the room a glass door opening on to a terrace, from which steps led into the grounds. Without uttering a word, I walked to this door, opened it, and quitted the room.

'I was, as I have told you, a boy accustomed to think and feel more deeply than was natural to my age. And while I wandered about these grounds, I revolved the situation in my mind. This beautiful place, with its wealth of wood that I could see stretching out before me, with its lovely flowers, that spoke of expensive care and cultivation; this stately old mansion, with its retinue of servants, who were fed more luxuriously than his own children, belonged by right to me, the son of the woman to whom he had bound himself by vows as solemn as any that were uttered before the altar. This was my birthright, and here

was I gazing upon it with the full consciousness that man's law proclaimed me an alien and an outcast!

“ Hallo! halloo ! I say, what are you doing here ?”

‘ This greeting came from a voice close to my rear. I turned round, and stood face to face with a boy about three years younger than myself, who carried a small riding-whip in his hand. The first glance at his features told me who he was, for I saw in them the hated likeness to him whom I had just left.

‘ I stood and gazed at him for a moment before I answered, and as I gazed my thoughts grew more bitter still. This, then, was the heir to all that I looked upon as mine,—this was the boy to whom the menials showed honour and respect as their future master, while I attracted no gaze save that of suspicion and insolent conjecture.

“ Cannot you answer a question ?” cried my *brother*, with an angry frown. I suppose he was not used to be treated with such disrespect as was implied in my taking time to reply.

‘ The insolence of his tone provoked in me

a similar insolence, and I answered in a voice as discourteous as his own,—

“What I am doing here is not your business.”

“But I will prove to you that it is my business,” he said, giving his riding-whip a flourish. “These are my father’s grounds, and I have a right to question trespassers.”

The word trespasser made every nerve in my body quiver. I went close up to him till our faces almost touched, and hissed rather than spoke the few, passionate words,—

“You young scoundrel! if you dare to call me a trespasser again, I will break every bone in your body!”

Whether he thought I was going to strike him, or whether the epithet I had applied to him drove him beside himself with rage, I know not, but the next moment he leaped back, and struck me across the face with his whip.

It seemed to me then as if some wrathful devil entered into my heart. Before he could move a step, I tore his riding-whip out of his hand, and forced him on his knees. My first impulse was to lash him as he had

lashed me, my second was to fight him fairly.

“If I let you get up now, will you fight me like a man afterwards, I gasped ?”

‘He promised he would, and I let him go. He was very pale, but I could see that he had plenty of pluck. We both pulled off our jackets, and set to work. In spite of the difference in our years, he was nearly as tall as I, and was the more scientific of the two ; but my mad passion would have made me a match for a giant that day, and he went down before my savage blows like a baby.

‘We had kept on like this for some ten minutes, and still he would not give in. In spite of my frenzy, I could not help admiring his pluck, when I suddenly felt a hand placed on my shoulder. I looked up, and met the gaze of my father ; my mother stood just a little behind.

“This seems to be a desperate encounter. Will one of you be kind enough to tell me who began it ?” he said, quietly.

‘My brother, as I must call him, hung his head, and I blurted out, loudly and passionately,—

“ He called me a trespasser, and cut me across the face with his whip. I made him fight me after that, and, as you see, I've given him a pretty severe thrashing. If you had not come, I would have thrashed him until he gave in and begged my pardon.”

“ Then it is exceedingly fortunate that I arrived on the scene, as murder might have been done,” said my father, in a cold, sneering tone, which seemed to go through my heart with the sharp stab of a knife; for I thought that I recognised in it the voice with which the world would hereafter speak to an outcast like myself.

He turned to my mother, and added, with a sarcastic smile,—

“ I should think this young gentleman must have given you some trouble.”

She met his mocking glance with one beneath which it wavered and fell, and I shall never forget the deep, concentrated passion that vibrated in her tones, as she answered slowly,—

“ You mistake his character greatly, and judge it from what you see here. I know him well enough to be sure that he would

not have laid a finger on this boy had he not been assailed first ; but he has too much of his mother's blood in his veins to bear insult or wrong with patience."

' She came to my side, and put her hand upon my arm.

' "Come, Ralph, it is time that we left this place."

' She was about to pass my father without another word ; but he stepped before her, and held out his hand.

' "Come, Mabel, we will not part bad friends because two boys have had a foolish quarrel," he said.

' He smiled as he uttered these words, and that smile so lighted up his handsome face, that I could fancy how easy it must have been for him, in the days of his youth, to have exercised so powerful an influence as he did over women. I think there must have been something in his look and manner, as he stood there, with his outstretched hand, which carried my mother back to the old days, when he seemed to her the incarnation of all that was noble and worthy of devotion, —for a softened look came into her face, and

she suffered her hand to rest in his for a moment.

“God forgive you, Richard, for the wrong you have done me and my unhappy children,” she said, as we turned away together.

‘In our walk back to the station I learned the result of their interview. The poor result of her pleadings was that he promised to allow another fifty pounds a-year until I reached the age of twenty-one, and to give me a hundred at any time that I saw a favourable opportunity of getting myself a good start in life. With these munificent terms,—with a sum that did not suffice to pay his legitimate son’s schooling,—my poor mother had to be content.

‘But after a day or two we plucked up courage, and I told my uncle that I was prepared to go out in the world. While I was engaged in seeking for employment, it seemed that she had been busy in seeking the same thing for herself, and with greater success than I, for when I came home one day, weary and disappointed, I found her with a radiant look on her face that brought back to it its old beauty.

‘She made me sit down by her, and told me the good news. When a girl she had developed a strong talent for acting, which had been fostered by her companions in the little town of H——, who were constantly getting up private theatricals, in which she took the part of leading lady, by virtue of her acknowledged superiority. Thrown almost upon our own resources, as we were, it had suddenly occurred to her that she might turn this gift to bread-winning purposes. Immediately on our return to town, she called on an actor who took pupils, and asked him for an opinion upon her qualifications. This man, who became ultimately one of her best and warmest friends, was charmed with her ease and style. He assured her that a couple of dozen lessons would perfect her in those details which distinguish the professional from the novice; and touched by the loneliness of her situation and her brave heart, he announced his willingness to take her upon half terms, and procure her an engagement at the end of his instruction.

‘With this prospect before her, she would not hear of my seeking any longer for a

clerkship. “ You shall *not* go forth to fight the battle of life without sufficient education, Ralph,” she said, determinedly. “ Something whispers to me that I shall be successful, and the first result of my success shall be this—you shall have some clever man to read with you, or go and read with him, so many hours a-day. If it ever happens that you should meet your brother in after life, you shall be able to boast that your mind is as cultivated as his own.”

‘ I would have resisted this proposition, but I saw my doing so would occasion her such unhappiness, that I did what she wished. At the end of a month her tutor friend had fulfilled his promise, and procured her an engagement in a secondary part at one of the best West End theatres, in the management of which he had some share. Fortune smiled upon her ; she made a hit, and when the piece in which she played had had its run, she was engaged again at double her former salary.

‘ As soon as the money began to flow in, she carried out her cherished scheme of education. I went to read with a tutor so many

hours a-day, to her great delight. I must tell you it was her wish that I should be a doctor, she being of the opinion that medicine was a more reliable profession than art. But in this I could not gratify her ; so, after a good-humoured battle between us on the subject, she let me have my own way, and I worked away under my uncle's tuition. One half the day I devoted to education, the other half I gave to my beloved art.

' My dear mother was spared long enough to see me qualified to gain a livelihood both for myself and Clara, if her talent had not been sufficient to maintain herself, should there be need. Thank God, there was no anxiety for our future darkening her mind when the end came. Oh, Helen, my darling, even to your sympathetic ear it seems that I can hardly relate the story of her death. She was so dear to us both—so good, so self-sacrificing, so idolized ! All that love and devotion could do to smooth the hard passage from this world to the next was done. Her last kiss was pressed upon my lips, her last breath was drawn in my arms, and I can hear still the last words she

uttered ere she went to rest,—“God bless you, my darling Ralph, and guard your heart from the fatal madness of love! May it never wreck your life as it has wrecked mine!” She died, Helen, of a broken heart, the victim of a remorseless scoundrel.’

‘And now it is my task to solace you for all you have suffered,’ cried the girl, as she threw herself into his arms.

‘Would that she had been spared to know you, my darling,’ he answered, fondly.

There was some mysterious influence in the events of that night which made them linger for ever in her memory. How many times in the after years did that quiet moonlit scene come before her as she beheld it now, in the first golden flush of her youth and beauty,—the silver water, just quickened in its going by the soft breath of the summer wind; the green banks sleeping beneath the quivering shadows of the tall trees,—those dark, earnest eyes looking in her own, with love, trust, and hope mingled in their gaze.



CHAPTER XIX.

AN EVIL OMEN.

THE day before Helen's return home had arrived, and the young people were sad at the prospect of separation, after the fashion of lovers in all climes and all ages.

'Stay another week,' urged Ralph, with a man's eagerness to bend circumstances to his will rather than yield to circumstances.

She shook her head with a mournful but resolute air. 'No, dearest, that cannot be. Remember that while we are enjoying ourselves here, poor mamma is alone with her own sad thoughts.'

'But that is her own fault; I invited her here.'

'Oh, the ignorance of you men,' cried Helen.

‘As if a house could be left by its responsible mistress at a moment’s notice. Pray, sir, do you think, when we are married, I shall be able to accept every invitation that is offered me?’

‘I suppose wherever I go, you will accompany me?’ answered Ralph. ‘I like a nice home, but I don’t wish my wife to be its slave. A woman is made as companion for a husband, not for the furniture. I have no admiration of what the poorer middle class style a “domesticated woman,” that is, a restless creature who cannot sit still for five minutes, but is eternally fussing about to see after something that would go on well enough without her.’

‘Dear Ralph, I am not sorry to find that these are your views, for I know I am far from being of the stuff out of which pattern housewives are made. It is a great relief to me to think that you will not look black if the joint should happen to be a little underdone, or if a shirt button should be absent at the supreme moment. I feel I ought to blush at confessing it, but I have not a turn for domestics.’

‘Thank heaven for it!’ cried her lover devoutly. ‘The women of the class I have alluded to seem to me to divide themselves into two sections. I call them the Stitchers, and the Pot and Panners. The latter section concerns itself chiefly with the kitchen and cooking arrangements, and is, in my opinion, the more meritorious of the two, since your creature comforts get satisfied. But I abominate the very aspect of a stitcher; like Mrs. Browning’s Amy, she keeps “her eyelids fastened down to that long piece of sewing,” and is a young woman of impulsive and irritable temperament, who finds a vent for it by making vicious little stabs with a needle. You will find a stitcher never travels without her armour, to wit, a thimble, a pair of scissors, a large assortment of needles, and various other deadly instruments in whose names and uses I am not instructed.’

Helen laughed merrily. ‘You absurd old boy, how you do rattle on. Well, then, I suppose when we are married, I am to be neither a Stitcher nor a Pot and Panner, but am to pass my time in contemplating your manifold excellences.’

‘Why, of course. I marry you not because I want a kind of superior servant, but because I wish to have a dear little friend to whom I can tell all my thoughts and fancies, who will be another and a dearer self.’

‘How happy will our future be!’ said Helen, with a dreamy look in her eyes, as if she was trying to realise the time when the now separate currents of their lives should be merged into one stream. She had no such faint distrust even as often enters the hearts of girls who have discovered from other than their own experience that men are ‘April when they woo, December when they wed.’ There was about Ralph Weldon a certain chivalrous tenderness, which told her that in his estimation women were made to be idolized and ever held sacred, not to be converted into the mere slaves of men’s pleasures. She had seen enough of the world to know that men of this stamp were rare, and she prized him accordingly.

‘Will you be happy even if your bright dreams of riches are not fulfilled?’ asked Ralph, with a mischievous smile.

She blushed a little at the question. ‘How

unkind of you to remind me of the baser part of my nature,' she answered; adding, after a pause,—'I own that before I knew you I was very sordid, and I had often promised mamma I would never marry any but a rich husband; but if not quite cured of my worldly ambitions, I am in a much healthier state now. So long as I possess your love, I shall not murmur at—'

'The want of a carriage, a butler and a footman, a lady's maid, a diamond set, and a new dress every week,' broke in Ralph, with a young lover's rapture at finding that this girl's love for him was so sincere.

She laughed merrily, and put her hand upon his lips. 'Hush, you mocking spirit! forbear to remind me of my follies. How absurd it does seem for a girl who has been brought up as I have been to dream of such impossible things. I remember when I first went to Lady Grahame's house to lunch I was rather frightened at the butler and footman; they looked so grand and gorgeous, as if I ought to have waited on them instead of their waiting upon me. I said "Thank you" when one of them poured out sherry for me

—an act of politeness which I have since discovered denoted ignorance of the forms of society.'

'Still, in spite of the terror you describe, I am of opinion you would become *grandeur*, and *grandeur* would become you,' replied Ralph, with an admiring glance at her graceful, supple figure and aristocratic bearing. 'There is a look about you that proclaims one "to the manner born." Six months' experience of wealth would enable you to play the *rôle* of a great lady as easily as if you had been it all your life.'

'What a pity some charitable person does not leave me ten thousand a-year at once, in order to try,' cried Helen, merrily. 'Alas! there is nobody I know of who could do so except my uncle Vanstone, and I don't suppose he will leave as many pence between us.'

'He is a rich man, is he not?' asked Ralph, who had heard little about this relative, Helen not being given to boasting.

'Oh, yes, worth about a quarter of a million; he is my grand-uncle, you know, and is near eighty. But I believe he will leave all, except a few legacies, to his nephew Hugh

Trevor, a much younger man than papa, and the son of old Mr. Vanstone's favourite sister.'

'Mr. Hugh Trevor is a lucky dog,' remarked Ralph, who was not himself greatly interested in this family history.

'The old gentleman simply worships him. Ten years ago everybody supposed Hugh had offended him mortally by marrying an actress; but after a few months of coolness he was restored to favour, and his allowance increased. Of late years he has gone in for exploration—discovering the sources of rivers, and all that sort of thing. He is in Africa now with a party. I think it very ungrateful of him to leave the old gentleman at his advanced age. He may die at any moment.'

'It is imprudent as well as ungrateful,' interposed Ralph. 'Old men are proverbially fickle, and at the last moment Mr. Vanstone might cut him out of his will.'

'There is no fear of that; very few fathers love their sons as he loves Hugh Trevor,' answered Helen; adding, with a sprightly air, 'So you see, dear, we are well off in rich relations, that is people who look down upon us. When you are an R.A., they will per-

haps condescend to notice us, and ask us to their houses.'

'And we will refuse to go, eh ?'

'Certainly, my dear, *if* we get the chance,' added Helen, prudently.

'*If* we get the chance!' repeated Ralph, with an injured air; then pointing towards the unfinished 'Maria Theresa,' he cried, in a tragic voice—'Look upon that picture, and dismiss "ifs" from your vocabulary. That picture is going to raise my name to the stars, and you to a drawing-room in one of the fashionable squares.'

'Seriously speaking, it ought to be a great success,' said Helen, gravely. 'The drawing seems to me perfect, the colouring lovely, and the grouping most striking and dramatic.' She gazed on the canvas intently for a few moments, then clasping her hands, she cried in a trembling voice, —'Oh ! Ralph, what shall I feel if our hopes come true—if that picture does make you really famous and known to the world ! My dear, I shall feel so proud, that when we walk out together, I shall want to stop everybody and say,—"This gentleman is Ralph

Weldon, the great painter, and *my husband!*"

In such manner did these young lovers communicate to each other their hopes, their wishes, their fears, their joy in the present, their trust in the future, until their souls were laid bare to the gaze of both. The evening passed in a somewhat solemn fashion, for the morrow of parting was painfully near. And, to crown the sadness, when the morrow did come, it was a most bright and beautiful day, rendering the task of quitting this little paradise more difficult than ever. Never had the grass looked greener, the roses redder, never had the birds sung in concert more sweetly.

'I must go and say good-bye to the flowers, and the hens, and the dear old pig,' said Helen, with a tearful visage. It has never been satisfactorily determined whether the hens and the pig manifested any grief at her departure, but she carried out the pious duty of bidding them farewell with a Christian spirit of self-sacrifice.

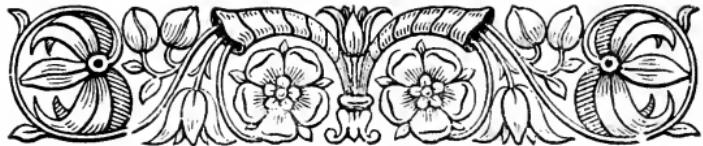
Of course Ralph did not weep, but as he walked back alone from the railway station,

the brightness of the day seemed to have faded. He went into his studio, and mechanically took up his brushes ; but after a few strokes, he threw them down. ‘ Maria Theresa’ was a splendid ideal, but he could not feel interested in her at that moment. He could only think of the woman he loved with his whole heart and soul, of her sweet and gracious ways, her dazzling beauty, the freshness and purity of her nature.

‘ Could ever mortal in the whole world have loved with such love as mine ?’ he cried out aloud in his reverie.

As he did so, he raised his head, and his eyes fell upon the portrait of his mother. As he gazed upon the sweet, sad face, with almost a kind of superstitious awe, there seemed to ring in his ears her dying words, ‘ May the fatal madness of love never wreck your life as it has wrecked mine !’

He turned impatiently from the portrait which had inspired such gloomy forebodings, to the bright day outside. ‘ Fool that I am to be so superstitious !’ he muttered half angrily to himself.



CHAPTER XX.

THE RICH RELATIVE.

WHEN Helen returned to her home, she found her mother in a state of great wrath and excitement, occasioned by the discovery that their one maid servant, in whom she had hitherto placed the strictest confidence, had turned out to be a thief.

‘Six of my best cambric pocket-handkerchiefs did I find in the wretch’s drawers,’ explained Mrs. Vanstone. ‘I wanted to send for a policeman, and give her in charge then and there, but your father interfered, as he always does in matters with which he has no concern, and the consequence was that she has only been turned out of the house.’

‘I am very glad you did not punish the poor creature,’ replied Helen, with a quiet smile; adding,—‘for I have often felt that I should like to help myself to several things that don’t belong to me.’

Mrs. Vanstone gave her daughter a glance of severest reproof.

‘My dearest mother, I do so wish you had the slightest touch of humour in your composition, you might be able to take a joke now and then. I am sure your ancestors must have been Scotch people.’

A few days afterwards, Mr. Vanstone made the following proposition to his daughter:—

‘I am going to call on my uncle Michael, to-morrow, Helen; will you come and see the old man too?’

‘Is it not rather late in the day for me to do the civil, papa? I have not seen him for years.’

‘Well, I should not have suggested it myself, dear; but the fact is, the last time I called on him, he enquired after you, and half hinted that he should be glad if you would come to see him.’

‘Capricious old donkey !’ cried Mrs. Vanstone, who never lost an opportunity of expressing her contempt for her husband’s relatives.

‘The old man seems to me to be breaking up fast,’ continued the father, discreetly taking no notice of this complimentary remark. ‘And who knows ? old men take sudden fancies ; he might put you in a corner of his will. At anyrate, the chance is worth the trouble of going.’

‘I will come with you, papa ! The prospect of a legacy is very sweet,’ cried Helen, with a cheerful voice.

So, on the following day, she accompanied her father to Mr. Michael Vanstone’s house in Portland Place. A staid-looking butler opened the door, and showed them straight into the room, where his master, who could only move about with great difficulty, sat during the greater part of the day.

The old gentleman was over eighty, but his sight and hearing were still very good. He held out his hand to his nephew, and said,—

‘So you have brought your daughter to see me ; that is a good fellow. Let me see,

I forgot her name ; no, no ; I remember it,—Helen.' And then, fixing his gaze on her, he continued,—' Come here, my dear, and give me a kiss, if you don't mind kissing so very old a man.'

She came close to him, and touched his forehead with her lips. Then, when she drew back, he kept hold of her hand, and examined her from head to foot with the eye of a connoisseur in beauty.

' You are very pretty, my dear,' he said, when he had finished his somewhat lengthy inspection. ' You take after the Vanstones, I see. There's a look of Gabriel about you ; but you have twice as much character as ever he had. Foolish boy ; foolish boy ! '

The old gentleman shook his head three or four times as he made this unflattering reference to his nephew. He had evidently gone back to the period of Gabriel's youth, when he had disgusted the family by marrying Martha Tubbs and losing his money.

' I am glad to see you looking so well, sir ! ' said Helen, thinking that it was necessary to break the awkward silence that followed.

‘Thank you, my dear, thank you!’ and then the old man went on in the low tone of one who is uttering his thoughts aloud. ‘A sweet voice, a pretty face, nice manners, and a graceful figure; in fact, a perfect young lady, quite a Vanstone.’

‘Are you talking of me, uncle?’ asked Helen, smiling.

‘Yes, my dear. I was not prepared to find I had so nice a niece.’

‘I am glad that I have so agreeably disappointed you.’

The old man held his peace for a few moments, then he addressed his nephew.

‘Gabriel, take her about the room, and show her the pictures. Are you fond of paintings, my dear?’

‘Very,’ she replied, as she turned to inspect them with her father.

One of them especially took her fancy, a ball-room scene; and the old man, seeing that she lingered before it, asked her,—

‘Are you fond of dancing, my dear? I suppose you are the belle of most balls you go to?’

‘I don’t suppose I have been to six in my

life, uncle,' replied the girl, bluntly ; adding, —‘We are too poor to be asked out to places where we might enjoy ourselves ; and if we were asked, papa could not afford to give me dresses. So it would come to the same thing.’

‘Ah, yes, I forgot,’ replied the old gentleman, who was evidently at times a little absent-minded. ‘Gabriel squandered his money like a fool ; and when men make fools of themselves, their children have to suffer for it. It’s very unjust, my dear ; but it’s in the nature of things.’

‘I suppose so,’ answered Helen, in her driest manner.

The old man would insist upon them stopping to lunch with him ; and in obedience to a look from her father, Helen declared her willingness to do so. During the meal he was most attentive to her, continually pressing her to take this and take that, and directing the butler to fill her glass long before it was empty.

‘Your father told me you were going to be married, my dear,’ he said, when they were about to bid him good-bye. ‘I hope

your future husband has got brains, and knows how to take care of his money.'

'He is clever enough, uncle ; and I think if he ever makes much money, it will be difficult for anybody to get it from him,' answered Helen, smiling at the earnestness with which this hope was expressed.

'I am glad to hear it ; glad to hear it. What is he by profession ?'

'An artist, sir.'

The old gentleman shook his head gravely. 'A noble calling without doubt, my dear ; but, I am afraid, a very precarious one. One prize to a thousand blanks. People starve you while you're living, and praise you up to the skies when you're dead. There was poor Willcox—I've got a few of his pictures here,—he died of a broken heart and hope deferred : the other day a picture of his was sold at Christie's for two thousand. A very precarious profession, my dear ; you ought to have chosen somebody with better chances of success.'

'I've not had a very great pressure of offers, sir,' replied Helen, with a smile half sad, half playful, for Mr. Vanstone's dis-

course upon her love's profession saddened as well as amused her.

The old man chuckled in a senile fashion at her answer. 'Ay, there's the difficulty : when foolish fathers squander their money, their children cannot make good matches. Well, my dear, good-bye, come again some day to see the old man.'

Helen promised that she would, but that promise was never kept, and they never met in this world again.

And after his visitors had gone, the old gentleman muttered to himself many times — 'Quite a Vanstone, and a perfect lady ; with plenty of spirit and character, too ; not like that foolish boy, Gabriel.'





CHAPTER XXI.

S H A D O W S.

HELEN stood at the window of the dingy drawing-room in Thomas Street, waiting for her lover, and gazing on the prospect before her with eyes which reflected as in a mirror the discontent of her soul.

‘Life is but a weary thing at the best, I fear,’ sighed the girl, as she turned from the ungenial spectacle, and seated herself at the piano, over which her fingers strayed in the abrupt and absent manner of a person too deeply engrossed in thought to heed what she is playing.

She had been reading a book containing the lives of the early English painters, lent her in all innocence by Ralph Weldon, and

its perusal had saddened her, as it might have done many girls of a more sanguine temperament. An optimist would have discovered that fortunes were made in those days, as witness the courtly Sir Joshua, with his fine coach, which he was so anxious should not resemble an apothecary's ; but she had dwelt upon the darker pictures,—on Wilson struggling in his garret, and without means to purchase the colours and canvas for his commissions ; on Barry, sequestered in the squalid den, occasionally cheered by the presence of his great countryman Burke ; or Morland, taking his wet pigs to the pawnbrokers, and other depressing incidents, illustrating the general unprofitableness of an artistic career. And, woman-like, she remembered with a kind of dismay that Ralph had many points in common with these unfortunate sons of genius, notably a disinclination to follow public taste, merely for the sake of the pecuniary reward it would bring. Had he not spoken in the most slighting terms of the art of Mr Flash, who had amazed thousands by painting what everybody could understand ?

Thinking over these things made her gloomy as to the future. Enthusiasts, of course, love their art; but those who are not enthusiasts themselves, but only connected with them, love their art according as it brings them more or less of what they want. Helen, as we know, wished to be rich; not because she took a sordid delight in money, but because money would place her in the position to which she aspired.

It is easy enough for a cynic to sneer at and condemn an ideal of this kind; but beauty is to a woman what intellect is to a man, the motive power which impels towards the path of ambition. The great field to which a woman's ambition tends is the social; and if it is not considered sordid in a man to aspire to be a Prime Minister, a Lord Chancellor, a Field-Marshal, it is hard to see why it should be held sordid in a woman to aim at obtaining social sovereignty. There are plenty of men to whom it is an easy task never to desire a higher lot, as there are plenty of women to whom it is equally easy to lead a humdrum life, dress dowdily, and hate anything

that savours of show ; but unhappily for herself, Helen did not belong to this contented class.

The poor girl was full of grand notions —all her ideas of life being on a large scale ; and her natural inclinations had been fed and strengthened by her mother's teachings. Much as she had enjoyed the fun and vivacity of that Bohemian party at 'Ralph's, it was a very different kind of festivity which formed her ideal :—a dining-room furnished in the most costly and elegant mode, the table graced with choice flowers, gleaming glass, and massive plate, noiseless attendants flitting in and out, guests dressed in irreproachable costumes,—this was the scene in which she would have felt a genuine delight. Again, cottages, however tasteful and picturesque, were not strictly to her taste : she preferred homes of the kind which she had seen in some old illustrated books of the country houses of England,—a majestic hall, or stately court, in the midst of beautiful grounds that required a legion of gardeners for their cultivation. Poor Helen, with her wealthy tastes, was certainly not quite the

wife for a poor man. Nevertheless, she loved Ralph with all her heart and soul ; and had another man, with ten thousand a-year, offered to give her all she sighed for to-morrow, she would have chosen love in a cottage,—so true is it that a woman may indulge at one and the same moment in sentiments apparently irreconcilable.

When Ralph entered the room he noticed the discontented look upon her face. He at once began to pet her, after the fashion of lovers, thinking that this was the best medicine for her malady.

‘ You are dull to-day, my darling,’ he said, tenderly. There surely never lived a man more qualified to show patience and pity to the woman he loved than Ralph Weldon.—‘ Let us go for a walk. Come and cheer yourself with a look at the Regent Street shops.’

It is the misfortune of well-meaning people that they often make great blunders in their attempts to do good. In her present mood, no more injudicious reference could have been made.

‘ I hate Regent Street,’ she answered

petulantly. 'A place like that is only fit for rich people. I see dresses which would suit me to perfection, and which I cannot have, and a heap of ugly women in carriages of which I should like to dispossess them.'

'Because they are ugly?' asked Ralph, trying to smile away her ill-humour.

Being gifted with a strong sense of humour, she saw that this petulance had its comic as well as its pathetic side, and she smiled too, as she replied,—

'I think that fact makes me more vindictive. If they were beautiful, they would seem more in harmony with their surroundings, and I should have a greater scruple in ousting them.'

'Nil desperandum, my darling!' cried Ralph gaily. 'The picture has yet to astonish the world, and in a few years we shall be able to walk down Regent Street, and make a clean sweep of everything we take a fancy to.'

She thanked him with a bright look.

'You dear old Ralph, I believe you would spend every penny you made upon me. I wonder if we ever shall be rich,—*really*

rich, I mean,—able to give balls and dinner-parties, and all that kind of thing ! Do you think we shall, dear ?'

As she put this question, she looked in his face with the innocent wistfulness of a child ; and the look alone proved, if proof were necessary, that she was far from being the sordid and calculating girl of the world that such a question might have implied.

' I have a very strong presentiment that I was born to make a deal of money, Helen,' he answered, in a voice of deep conviction.

' After all, I don't think one can enjoy life much without money ; do you, dear ? ' she said again, with the half-coaxing air of one who wishes to win adherents to a pet theory.

Ralph temporised in a base fashion,—

' Well, my darling, I am afraid I do not feel quite so strongly on this subject as you ; but I have no doubt wealth is very agreeable.'

She gave a little sigh.

' I wish I had your sunny nature ; I believe you would be cheerful in a garret, if you had a canvas and a few brushes. But the lives of women are so aimless ; we have no occu-

pation to fall back upon,—we can only live for the world.'

'And for love,' interposed Ralph, gently.

Her glance kindled, and flinging her soft arms round his neck, she cried,—

'Forgive me for not saying that first. After all, dearest, love is the best thing in the world, and wealth only the second best!'

'Hurrah!' shouted her lover, joyfully. He was about to add something, when a thundering knock at the street door startled them both. Helen ran to the window, and returned from it with a frowning look.

'We were just now talking of fine carriages and plain women: here are specimens of both. Our distinguished relative, Lady Grahame, has condescended to pay us a visit.'

'Is it too late for us to beat a retreat?' asked Ralph, who had no desire to make the acquaintance of fine ladies.

'We should stumble against her on the stairs to a certainty; besides, why should we basely fly? We will stop here and beard her; if she evinces a desire to be impertinent to you, put her down at once.'

The door opened, and the great lady was ushered in by the awe-stricken maid, in whose judgment her ladyship seemed similar, in all respects, save the one quality of beauty, to those gorgeous personages who lived and moved in the pages of her penny literature.

Helen greeted her distinguished relative with a careless ease and absence of anything like deference, that drew forth Ralph's warmest admiration. Much as she desired wealth for herself, it was evident that she was not prepared to play the sycophant to those who had it.

She introduced her lover, and Lady Grahame displayed towards him the somewhat chilling courtesy of one who feels that she is brought into momentary contact with a being from another and inferior sphere.

'You never come to see me now,' she said, turning to Helen.

'I have been very much engaged of late,' replied the girl, curtly.

It was not difficult to discover the cause of the antipathy between the two. Lady Grahame was a fussy woman, filled to overflowing with notions of her own importance,

not absolutely bad-hearted, nor altogether devoid of pity for the life which Gabriel Vanstone's folly had brought upon his child. She would have been very willing to take her young relative under her wing, if Helen had shown herself prepared to exhibit a somewhat exuberant gratitude and deference in return. But this was just the sort of coin in which the fiery and impulsive girl would not repay her; and hence it had come about that, feeling herself aggrieved by an attitude at once guarded and vigilant, the attitude of one quick to resent anything that bordered on patronage, Lady Grahame had ceased to take any interest in her, and had privately expressed to Mr. Vanstone her regret that his daughter was of so irritable and obstinate a temper.

Mr. Vanstone came in as soon as he had slipped on his best coat, and made himself generally presentable, and Helen, giving a look to Ralph, took leave of her relative with the same almost defiant *nonchalance* that had marked her reception of her.

‘ You will excuse my abrupt leave-taking, Lady Grahame. Mr. Weldon and I are

going to take advantage of the fine day for a walk.'

Her ladyship shook the proffered hand coldly. She was offended, and perhaps not unreasonably, with the abrupt departure, and the careless insolence that seemed to lurk behind both tone and manner.

'Your daughter's manners will never make her popular or secure her friends,' she said, in a decided voice, to Mr. Vanstone, when the door had closed upon the lovers. 'I am very sorry that she received my advances with so bad a grace. I might, at least, have helped her to find a husband among a better class than she has chosen from.'

Helen and Ralph went into the dining-room, the door of which was shut by her with an emphasis that indicated her dissatisfaction with life in general and the visit of her relative in particular.

'I wish she would not bring her fine carriage and her gaping servants into this street!' she cried, angrily. 'If I were rich, I would take care to visit my poor connections in the quietest brougham I had, and not insult their poverty by a display like this.'

Then, to Ralph's amazement, she buried her head between her hands, and burst into tears. There were many causes besides the unwelcome spectacle of Lady Grahame's fine equipage at the root of this sudden overflow.

He put his arms round her, and laying the tear-stained face against his breast, kissed her, as if she had been a child whose grief could be soothed by the caresses of those it loved.

‘Hush, hush, my darling, you must not sob like that, or you will make yourself seriously ill.’ Then, with the injustice of a lover who takes up the hates and loves of his mistress as a natural consequence of their relation, he added, in a savage tone,—‘I wish that confounded woman had been at the bottom of the sea; it is her coming that has upset you.’

She drew herself from his embrace, and wiped away the tears hastily, feeling heartily ashamed of her foolish weakness.

‘Please forgive me, dear; I have not felt very well all day—a little low and nervous; and when I have these feelings, the slightest

thing will cause me to make such a silly exhibition as the one just now.'

He kissed her again and again, thinking that love ought to be the best cure for the state she had just described. He knew well enough, poor fellow, that one of her kisses would have worked a marvellous cure on him.

'O Ralph, dearest!' she cried suddenly, in tones that vibrated with an almost passionate despair,—'I fear I shall make you but a sorry wife, after all. I fancied at first that your love had driven the discontent and the shadows from my heart, but they have come back—they have come back!'

He drew her closer to him, and soothed her as best he could ; but a chill crept over his own heart as he heard these seemingly ominous words. Was it possible that she did not love him, or at least did not love him in the way that a proud and sensitive man desires to be loved ? And yet he could hardly believe this. As he put the question to himself, there rushed across him the recollection of a thousand trivial acts and words which successfully combated such a theory.

The cleverest actress in the world could not have feigned what these displayed, beyond the possibility of a doubt. A woman can assume up to a certain point, but, beyond that point, further feigning becomes a task from which the hardiest dissembler shrinks. The girl who loves with all her strength, exhibits that love in glance, and speech, and word, without being conscious of the revelation she makes. And while his memory rejoiced in recalling those abundant proofs, he could not doubt her faith.

But he felt saddened as he thought of the settled discontent to which that passionate regret bore witness. The love which was overlaid with such a feeling seemed like a flawed diamond. And yet, life's blessings mostly come to us in this way, clogged with conditions that take away half our capacity of enjoying them. His sense of justice was too strong to permit him to feel angry with her.

‘Have I not also an ideal which I pursue with a passionate longing?’ he thought. ‘Why should I blame her for an ideal, so natural to her sex and age, because it is

different from mine. When I first beheld her, I said what a pity that such beauty should lie hidden; and can I wonder if she thinks the same. But I am sure of this—that her heart is true.'

He knew not, as he communed thus with himself, that there was swiftly drawing near a time when he would learn to doubt this flattering judgment.





CHAPTER XXII.

A HAPPY DAY.

HE summer was at its close, and Helen sighed unconsciously when she was reminded of it by hearing her mother inform Mr. Vanstone that she would find it impossible to go through the coming winter without a change, however brief, from the monotony of Thomas Street. Every year did this worthy family manage, by dint of great economy, to indulge in an excursion to some watering-place, not far from the great centre. Consulting the head of the house was a mere matter of form, as his invariable answer on every occasion was, —‘Just as you please, my dear.’

And Helen, as it has been said, sighed at perceiving that the summer was so nearly

over. It was one of those sighs which people give to the memory of exquisite hours that they would fain live over again. It seemed to her that this golden summer had given birth to her happiness, and that when the flowers had faded, and the skies were grown chill and gray, the breath of winter would wither this, with the other offspring of its glorious rival.

‘I don’t believe such bliss as that could ever last long,’ thought the girl to herself. ‘It was too sudden ; it leapt into vigorous life too soon.’

When Ralph heard of the intended excursion, he proposed that they should all come down to Richmond. Of course, this invitation sprang not from love for his future mother-in-law, but from a more selfish motive,—to wit, the desire to have Helen near him, as he was precluded from taking a long holiday. Mrs. Vanstone thanked him politely, but explained that the sea air could alone brace her exhausted frame.

So it was arranged that they should all seek health on the sands of that fashionable resort of Cockneydom,—Ramsgate.

‘A disgusting place, full of snobs and Jews,’ remarked the linen-draper’s daughter, with a curl of her lip ; but ‘what are we to do ? If we go to Scarborough or Folkestone, we should want dresses, which we cannot afford. At Ramsgate, it does not matter a fig what you look like ; you can walk about in the shabbiest things you have got, and not blush ; for you have too much contempt for your neighbours to care what they think or say about you.’

Ralph smiled rather more appreciatively than was his wont at the satirical utterances of his betrothed’s mother.

‘I wish there were more of your philosophy carried into practice, Mrs. Vanstone. The prevailing characteristic of this century seems to be the dread of one’s neighbours. All action is regulated by the sycophantish reflection of what will our little circle think when it hears that we have done this, or left undone that.’

Then, when he and Helen were alone, he suggested that they should have one day of enjoyment before she departed for the sea-side. Her face brightened at the suggestion,

for she was as fond of an 'outing' as if she had been a hard-worked milliner's assistant ; and, in her turn, she proposed the Crystal Palace.

' The grounds are beautiful, and one does not mingle with the *canaille*.'

The *canaille*, it may be remarked, was one of Mrs. Vanstone's favourite expressions when speaking of her inferiors. So it was arranged that the Crystal Palace should be their destination, and that Clara Weldon should accompany them.

Since the day of Lady Grahame's visit, there had arisen between them not exactly a cloud, but a certain consciousness, and this had ever since imparted to their relations the slightest tinge of embarrassment. She felt she had betrayed a discontent which could not fail to wound him, and inspire him with doubt ; and he knew, from certain palpable signs, that she entertained this feeling. No wonder, then, that a certain restraint was the inevitable result of this mutual knowledge. But from the time that their departure for the sea-side had been proposed, Helen managed to resume more of her old self—to divest herself to a great extent of the

awkwardness which had been caused by that rankling memory. It might have been that the prospect of departure showed her how necessary Ralph had become to her life; it is certain that her manner had never been more tender to him than it was during those few days which still remained. Had a mysterious instinct whispered to her that they were the last days of happiness she was ever to share with him again, she could not have proved herself more eager to make the most of the short-lived joy they proffered.

Ralph noted the change, and while half wondering, was yet wholly delighted at it, and interpreted it as a favourable omen. Again he dared to hope that the future would be cloudless. It was this narrow and meagre life—this gloomy house, would make the girl capricious and fretful: she would recover her cheerfulness when she became his wife, encompassed and strengthened by his deep and enduring love. How he wished that he had never consented to that year's tormenting delay!

So when the morning of their excursion came, it found Helen very bright and joyous.

She was up early, for her toilet demanded much thought and care ; and as she tried on this and that ribbon, in order to see which would make her look more beautiful in her lover's eyes, and perhaps in her own, for a time she almost forgot that she had a long-standing quarrel with fortune because it had denied her fine dresses, brilliant jewels, and all the pleasures of wealth. Just as she had finished operations, she heard Ralph's knock, and flew down into the hall to welcome him and his sister. Clara Weldon, who was the living embodiment of tact, bestowed a hasty kiss upon her, and departed immediately in search of Mrs. Vanstone, in order that she might leave the lovers to their own devices.

And then, when she was out of sight and earshot, Ralph took his betrothed by the hands, and led her into that dingy little parlour which her presence made a paradise to him.

‘ How charming you look ! How in the world do you contrive to create so great an effect out of so little ? ’ he asked, gazing at her proudly.

‘By force of native talent, I suppose,’ she answered, with a happy smile; then, with a child’s simplicity, she added, ‘Shall we not have a delightful day together, dear Ralph?’

‘I am always happy where you are, my own darling,’ he said, tenderly.

‘So I make you very happy, do I?’ she asked, after a pause, and as she spoke her fair face was lighted up with the old loving expression. ‘Well, dearest, I can return the compliment; you are the only being in whose presence, in thinking of whom I forget all that has made me so morbid, so discontented, so hard, has so warped my character and embittered my heart.’

A flush, the flush of happiness, dyed his dark cheek: here was the old Helen speaking to him again. ‘Am I then as dear to you as you are to me?’ he asked, as he drew her closer to his heart.

‘You are all in all to me,’ she said, with an earnestness that was almost passionate. ‘Are we not united by sympathies, aspirations, by even prejudices shared in common? Your spirit, like mine, revolts against the

meanness of our present life ; you look forward as eagerly as I do to a future that will chime in with our desires. Is it not so, dearest Ralph ?'

And to please her, he answered that it was so, although in his heart he cared little for the baubles to which she attached such value. She gave him an unsought kiss, and said, in a lower tone, 'There are ties between us which cannot easily be broken.'

'Which can *never* be broken,' added Ralph, eagerly.

'Never be broken, then,' she said, firmly. 'Together we have dreamed of a fairy future ; together we will hasten to our dream's fulfilment or—its ruin.'

'To its fulfilment, my darling,' he answered, with a reassuring smile. 'Yes, Helen, for your sake I will bend all my energies to the task of money-getting. Since wealth can give you happiness, I will go and seek it. It will drive away for ever the shadows from the face that is my sun, and perhaps it will make you love me more.'

She hung her head, and for a moment a blush of shame mantled her cheek, for a

moment she felt that there was something ignoble in this keen desire for outward tinsel and trappings. 'It would not make me love you more, dear Ralph.'

'But it would bring perfect content, and perfect content might bring greater love,' he said, with a smile in which there lurked the faintest satire.

With an impetuous movement she flung herself upon his breast. 'Oh, how you must despise me in your heart! what a weak, sordid, purposeless creature you must think me!' she cried, tearfully.

He soothed her and kissed her fondly. How was it possible that he could ever be brought to apply such epithets to her? Was she not to him a radiant young goddess, the one being who had shed a golden light upon his life, and tuned the chords of his spirit to a ravishing music? Even her very weakness endeared her to him, for did it not prove that she needed his strength to guide and support her?

'Hush, dearest, never whisper such a word as that even to yourself. Love and contempt can never go together, my darling. I

know all you have suffered during these galling years of contact with people so much your inferiors, of exclusion from circles which you would have so much adorned.' Such tender excuses as these did he make for her petulance and discontent.

Their interview was put an end to by the entrance of Miss Weldon. She was eager to get to the Palace, for her pleasures, like those of Helen, were few and far between. She was a proud little lady, and although deeply attached to her brother, could not bear to be dependent on him. They had had many skirmishes on this subject, but she would never give in, and in consequence worked very hard in her studio at Richmond.

'Come, young people, if we intend to have a long day, we had better start at once, for Mrs. Vanstone expects us back to a tea-dinner at eight,' she said, pleasantly. She was younger than Ralph, as we know, but she was apt to assume a maternal air towards these lovers.

'Mrs. Vanstone's hospitality shall not be treated with ingratitude,' replied Ralph, in tones that were a trifle sarcastic, for he was

perfectly aware that there was no love lost between him and his future mother-in-law. 'We shall get to the Palace about eleven, and by six or thereabouts, I think, the most inveterate sight-seer will be ready to cry, "Hold!"'

So these young people left dingy-looking Thomas Street for that Palace which is associated in the minds of so many thousands with a happy day, even competing in the bestowal of simple happiness with the much-advertised Rosherville. And to the hard-working young artist, his equally hard-working sister—the girl who was debarred from the pleasures which belong to fortunate youth, whose aspirations struggled hopefully against the chilling influence of her surroundings—even this small excursion afforded delight. They did not seem to know the meaning of fatigue, for the contentment of the spirit lent vigour and energy to the frame. They traversed the grounds over and over again; examined the china and glass stalls with secret longings; criticised the specimens of ancient architecture; laughed and shuddered at the savages who

mutilate themselves in so disgusting a fashion, and felt regret when they were reminded that Mrs. Vanstone expected them back to a tea-dinner. In the insolence of youth they were bold enough to despise that humble repast; for had they not dined already on three courses, moistened with champagne and other glorious wines? After the recollection of this elegant banquet, tea-dinner sounded but a meagre entertainment, smacking strongly of the pinched and scurvy life out of which they had escaped for one day at least. And Helen's delight reached its highest point when Ralph, after absenting himself for some moments, returned to her with a parcel which contained an artistic black tea-pot, over which she had lingered lovingly at one of the china stalls.

And when they returned to Thomas Street, even Mrs. Vanstone's severe countenance and frigid demeanour could not damp their ardent spirits. The calm, staid Ralph laughed like a school-boy, while the voices of the girls filled the dingy old room with the sweetest music in the world—the unre-

strained laughter of glad hearts. Even Mr. Vanstone was carried away by the infection, and forgetting his habitual awe of his wife, chuckled and cackled in a feeble fashion. It was late when Ralph and his sister rose to leave, and then the master of the house took him into a little den, which was called his "study," and said in a hesitating voice,—

‘I’m very sorry to trouble you, my dear boy, but I’ve had a bill just sent in that I expected would not be presented before next quarter. It is only five pounds, but my money is all so appropriated that I must borrow it somewhere. Would it be an inconvenience to you to let me have that sum for a few weeks?’

‘Certainly you shall have it,’ replied Ralph, cordially, for in his present mood he would have been pleased to shower obligations on anybody who could claim the least connection with Helen. ‘I will send you a cheque by the first post to-morrow.’

‘A thousand thanks, my dear boy,’ exclaimed Mr. Vanstone, with much effusion, and something like a tear in his right eye. He shook Ralph’s hand very heartily for

some seconds, and said, as he let it go, 'You are a good fellow, and merit every happiness ; I trust Helen will make you as good a wife as you deserve.'

Then, after this brief episode, there was general leave-taking, and Helen's last words were, 'Good-bye, dear Ralph ! we have had a most glorious day ;' and then this enthusiastic young man went home very happy in the present and very confident of the future.





CHAPTER XXIII.

A FREAK OF FORTUNE.

 FEW days after the excursion to the Palace, which had given such satisfaction to all, Mr. Vanstone took his family to that famous retreat of Cockneydom, Ramsgate. The ambitious spirit of his wife would have led her to prefer the Continent, or, failing that, some place like Scarborough, situated at a distance from London that put it beyond the reach of the vulgar people. But as their limited income repressed ambition of even this modest kind, she had to be content with the humbler watering place.

They left Ralph Weldon hard at work, but he found time to compose an epistle to Helen every other day; and as these letters

were very long, containing agreeable chat, and, what was still more interesting, eternal protestations of his love for her, the girl found she hardly stood in need of light literature. As she thought over those tender and glowing sentences,—for what true-hearted girl would not have her lover's letters by heart?—she fostered into stronger growth the belief that, with such affection as this shedding a radiant light on the future, she might find happiness in another way than she had dreamed of. Many people had fine houses, plenty of servants, handsome furniture, carriages, and all the other emblems of luxury ; but she felt pretty certain that there were very few girls who had found such a lover as her own dear old Ralph. With his last letter under her pillow, and his name the last upon her lips and in her heart, she used to glide into the land of dreams, a much happier land than that of reality, without a doubt.

While Mr. Vanstone was escorting his wife and daughter about Ramsgate, he received a telegram which caused him some annoyance, and yet created expectations of an agreeable nature. His uncle had died

suddenly, and his attendance was requested at the funeral and the reading of the will.

‘A new suit of mourning is what I can ill afford just now,’ he grumbled; ‘but still the old man may have left us a legacy. Small it will be sure to be, but, however small, better than nothing.’

‘You need not expect much from that quarter,’ said his wife, with her customary bitterness. ‘For my part, I have never seen the benefit of possessing rich relatives; they do no more for you than poor ones, very often not so much.’ This was meant, of course, for a dig at Mr. Vanstone, and a defence of her own humble origin.

‘Still, my dear, I cannot stop away from the funeral.’

‘Who would be mad enough to suggest that you should?’ retorted the wife, with great asperity. ‘Of course you must go. I suppose I may be allowed to venture a remark without being snapped up in that fashion.’

So Mr. Vanstone departed to hear his uncle’s will read, and, as he left the house, his wife’s disbelief in the possibility of any

benefit accruing from the possession of rich relatives seemed to be slightly shaken, for she exhorted him to send them a telegram immediately if he should happen to hear good news.

‘But even if he does leave a legacy, it is sure to be small. That squandering spendthrift, Hugh Trevor, will be certain to have every penny the old man can leave him with decency,’ she said to Helen, as mother and daughter watched Mr. Vanstone’s awkward figure shambling along in the direction of the railway station.

‘And Hugh Trevor is not thirty yet, quite a young man ; how he will be able to enjoy the fortune left to him !’ said Helen in a musing tone. ‘Old Mr. Vanstone is worth a quarter of a million, I suppose ?’

‘What does it matter how much he is worth, my dear ?’ replied her mother sharply. ‘Thinking of it only makes one envious, when one remembers your father is a nearer relative by a generation than this young scapegrace.’

‘Has he been so much of a *mauvais sujet*, then ?’

‘Oh yes, always getting into debt, or doing something that annoyed his great uncle, only great uncle by marriage, after all. When he married that actress girl on the sly, nobody expected he would ever be forgiven ; but somehow he managed to wheedle and coax the old man into good temper again.’

The day wore on, but no telegram arrived, and Mrs. Vanstone waxed more bitter than ever.

‘I knew there would be nothing. He cannot spare a paltry thousand out of his quarter of a million, although he knew we wanted it badly enough, and were down in the gutter.’ When she was excited, Mrs. Vanstone indulged in English more vigorous than elegant.

At last, Mr. Vanstone’s knock was heard at the door, and Helen flew down to open it.

‘You have no good news, papa ?’ she asked, eagerly.

‘I will tell you all, upstairs, my child,’ he replied.

His daughter followed him wonderingly. His tone and manner were peculiar : she

half longed, half dreaded to hear him speak. He entered the room, pulled off his gloves with great deliberation, and then, fixing on his wife a glance which would have been satirical, save for his habitual awe of her, said in a voice from which his ordinary hesitation had fled,—

‘I have heard my uncle’s will read, Mrs. Vanstone, and I am happy to be able to tell you that the life of poverty and obscurity into which I brought you, and which you have found so galling, is at length ended. I inherit a fortune of two hundred thousand pounds !’

Mrs. Vanstone gave a cry that seemed almost delirious in its expression of intense rapture—Helen stood pale and trembling. At that moment, to her infinite honour, far above the joy at receiving this wealth, rose the thought of Ralph Weldon, and the effect that it might have upon their engagement.

‘Thank God !’ ejaculated Mrs. Vanstone, growing devout in her purely selfish satisfaction. ‘Helen, have *you* nothing to say on this merciful stroke of Providence ; you who always hated poverty ?’

‘I can say nothing at present,’ replied the girl, speaking with a great effort. ‘I am too bewildered : it is all like a dream. But you are right—nobody hated poverty more than I.’

Her mother, who was a shrewd enough woman, divined the reasons of this reticence, and turned the conversation.

‘But tell me, Gabriel, why did he disinherit Hugh Trevor?’

‘It seems that although the old man pretended to forgive his going to Africa, he had made up his mind that his money should never enrich one who had so neglected him. He left the two hundred thousand to me, because I never expected it, and the rest to charities and in legacies. It was the eccentric conduct of an eccentric old man.’

‘Thank heaven that his eccentricity took this turn!’ was the wife’s pious answer ; ‘but he has surely left something to Trevor.’

‘Oh yes, enough to bring him in about five hundred a-year. I am very glad of it, for I should not have liked to feel that I had deprived the poor devil of everything, although he did behave like a fool in his marriage.’

They were still discussing this branch of the subject, when Helen rose, and said that she should retire, as she had a headache. When she was gone, Mrs. Vanstone drew her chair closer to that of her husband, for she liked him better since his good fortune, and tabled what had now become the most important domestic subject.

' You saw that Helen seemed to show the least delight of all ; you can understand the reason of this as well as I. She dreads that she will be separated from Ralph Weldon. Now, painful as that separation may prove to her for a time, it *must* come, and we shall be acting kindly to her in making it come as quickly as possible. I never liked the match, as you know ; but, in our position, it was idle to expect anything better, and so long as it was for her happiness, and you made no objections, I did not wish to interpose obstacles. But now that our circumstances have so changed, that we shall take the place in the world from which your poverty has alone excluded us hitherto, the thing is preposterous and impossible. The daughter of a man whose

income is nearly ten thousand a-year, cannot marry a poor artist. You must see this for yourself.'

' You seem to see it well enough for both, my dear,' answered Mr. Vanstone, with mild sarcasm. His sudden accession to greatness had given him importance in his own eyes, and even prompted him to rebel to a certain extent against the tyrannical influence which had been exerted so powerfully and successfully for so many years.

' But I wish you to act in the matter, or, if you will not act yourself, give me the right to do so. Ralph Weldon is a man of the world, and knows full well that while a husband can elevate a woman to his level, a woman cannot elevate a husband to hers. He cannot remain blind to the fact that were his position very much better than it is, a marriage with a girl of Helen's expectations is beyond his reasonable hopes.'

' Men of the world don't see clearer than other people, where their own feelings are concerned,' said Mr. Vanstone, drily.

' I cannot help his obtuseness : it will have to be as I say.'

‘And how about Helen? She has a high spirit, and resembles you too much to prove a very obedient pupil.’

‘Leave her to me,’ answered Mrs. Vanstone, with a quiet smile. ‘She loves him very dearly, I know; but she is ambitious to a fault. When I sketch out the future for her, show her all that she gives up for his sake, for the sake of a foolish infatuation, threaten her that if she marries against our will, she shall never inherit a penny of your money, I think I know which side will win.’

‘You are a clever woman, no doubt,’ said Mr. Vanstone, reluctantly, as if it were painful to him to have to pay any compliment to a wife who had proved such a bitter trial to him; ‘but in Helen, I fancy, you will find your match. If you could only show her, my dear, how heartily sick of each other they will be six months after marriage, you might have a good chance of succeeding.’

‘Yes; we married for love, did we not?’ said his wife, with a hard smile.

‘I believe *I* did. I know nothing about you,’ replied Mr. Vanstone, with a glance of great cunning.

‘Well, Gabriel, let bygones be bygones. I have not been the best tempered of women, I admit ; but a life of sordid cares and poverty soon sours a wife, and makes her seem hard and unfeeling. We shall be able to jog along more comfortably in the future.’

‘Not a doubt of it,’ assented her husband. in his driest tone.





CHAPTER XXIV.

THE AMBITIOUS MOTHER.

IF it be true, as a general proposition, that the finer nature understands the coarser as well as its own, it is equally true that the coarser nature can hardly ever bring itself to understand the finer. Mrs. Vanstone possessed most of the qualities that go to make a devoted mother. If she could have rescued Helen from death at the expense of her own life, she would have consented to the sacrifice. Out of their meagre income she had pinched and denied herself to give to her; and her first thought, on their receiving the news of their sudden accession to fortune, had been the advantages it would confer upon her child.

Never having experienced the divine feel-

ing of love in her own youth, she could not understand it in another. She knew enough of human nature to guess that Helen would suffer somewhat at being separated from her lover ; but she thought that this suffering, in any case, could only be temporary.

‘ Youth soon recovers from wounds of this nature,’ she said, soothingly, to herself ; and, in inflicting this wound upon her, she was only imitating the benevolence of the surgeon, who gives pain in order to procure permanent benefit. In a year or two, when the memory of this early attachment had grown faint, and Ralph was forgotten, when some worthier suitor, such as her beauty and wealth would be sure to bring forth, should console her for the past, the girl would thank her mother for her present harshness.

Moreover, was not Helen ambitious herself ? Had she not sighed long enough for the life that was now within her grasp ? When she calmly revolved the future before her, it was impossible that love could outweigh ambition. She loved Ralph dearly, no doubt, as girls of a sensitive and susceptible temperament do love in the golden

flush of youth ; but this was a temptation that no girl, possessed of the smallest share of worldly wisdom, could resist.

So reasoned Mrs. Vanstone, in order to stifle her conscience, and justify her hard purpose to herself. There is no sterner or more inexorable parent than she who is devoured with ambitious projects for her child. To that devouring Moloch she will sacrifice the happiness,—the peace of heart and mind,—that another would consider the blessings most necessary to secure. She loved her daughter so well that she was determined to inflict upon her this kind of moral murder,—to blight her youth, and turn her best and noblest feelings into a curse to their possessor.

It was with a foot and heart of lead that Helen entered the breakfast-room the next morning. She had passed a wretched and sleepless night, and the circles round her eyes told that she had wept much. Instinct told her, too truly, what sacrifice the future had in store for her, and she knew not how to avoid it. She knew that the wealth for which she had so long and ardently sighed

was come at last, with a curse instead of a blessing.

To many young ladies of this enlightened century, the avoidance of such a sacrifice would have seemed easy enough. If her mother proved inexorable, a secret marriage could soon be effected. But Helen was not one of those independent young ladies. To disobey the mother whom she loved so dearly, who, to her, if to no one else, had shown herself an angel of love and goodness, was a thing she never contemplated for a moment. She could endure to have her life blighted.—to die, perhaps, of a broken heart, but she could never endure the burden of remorse that would follow an unfilial act. She would plead on her knees, and with bitter tears, as if she were pleading for her life, to be permitted to keep her faith unstained; but if that pleading were of no avail, she must steel herself to bear the crushing blow.

The breakfast went on in almost perfect silence. Helen ate nothing, and her hands trembled with her pent-up emotion. Mrs. Vanstone did not observe these signs un-

moved, but they did not alter her determination one jot,—only made her rather more eager to get over the inevitable scene as soon as possible. Two modes of proceeding had suggested themselves to her mind: it was possible to be either tenderly inflexible or sternly inflexible. She had debated long and anxiously with herself as to which was the better course to pursue, and the result was that she elected to be stern.

Mr. Vanstone, in obedience to a private arrangement, withdrew, and left mother and daughter alone. For a moment, as she looked at the white and miserable face, Mrs. Vanstone hesitated; then hushing down her better feeling, she addressed the poor girl.

‘Helen, I see you guess the subject I am about to approach. It is as hard a task for me to speak as it is for you to listen; do me the justice to bear this in mind. Hitherto I have not crossed you in much; my aim has rather been to gratify every reasonable wish. I cross you now because it is my duty, because I have your welfare at heart, and because I love you better than myself.

In one word, your engagement must be broken off.'

Pale and trembling the poor girl sat still, like one deprived of the power of speech. The big drops trickled slowly down her cheeks, and her bosom shook with a convulsive sob, but she spoke no word. Mrs. Vanstone went on quickly, for this mute distress was more painful to view than more clamorous grief.

'At first, I know it will be hard to bear, and my love and pity shall help you to bear it as bravely as possible. But time will cure the wound, and in years to come you will thank me for the conduct which now you blame. Of one thing be certain — when I say this *must* be, I mean it *shall* be. I pity you from the bottom of my heart, and I will support you under the heavy trial; but do not dream of altering my resolution.'

There was a dead silence, and then Helen fell upon her knees, and clasped her mother's hands convulsively between her own.

'O mother! dearest mother! do not repeat those cruel words. If you could but

see into my heart, and learn how he has grown a part of it. Six months ago I was as worldly, as proud and ambitious as you could have wished. But since I have known him, I have learned a better and purer creed. It seems but yesterday that I thought life without wealth must be barren of real happiness, and *now*—my heart would break with joy if I knew that, by renouncing in the present and the future every hope of the kind, I could keep the vow I made to him, and become his wife. If you could but imagine how I love him, you would rather kill me as I kneel before you now than bid me prove unfaithful.'

Her tears, her despairing tones, lent an eloquence to the simple words, that might have melted a heart of stone. But they did not shake for a second her mother's resolution. Her mind was filled with the visions of the future: she saw this idolized child reigning by right divine in the world which she would adorn with her grace and beauty—admired, envied, caressed, and flattered by those whose admiration conferred power and honour. Was it possible she should sur-

render this bright dream to the gratification of a foolish and evanescent feeling?

‘Cease, cease, Helen. I would sooner see you in your coffin than wedded to a man who would drag you down to his level. Conquer this folly as best you may, for while I live, I swear you shall never be his wife.’

She rose as she finished the utterance of those cruel words, and passed swiftly from the room, leaving the wretched girl in that suppliant attitude.

And to Helen the sound of the closing door was like a death-knell to her hopes, for it told her that the brightest dream of her youth was scattered by a merciless hand. She rose, trembling in every limb, and felt as she did so that the sunshine was gone out of her life for ever. There came rushing tumultuously on her memory the bright scenes of the past—the evening on which he had wooed her as they plucked the roses, fitting emblem of their brief but passionate love, doomed like them to live so short a time,—the night upon the moonlit river, when he had told her his history, and she had rejoiced to think that she could console

him for all he had suffered,—and a hundred other mementos, to be charged now and henceforth with bitterness and unavailing regret.

She looked out on the dull and gloomy street, whose aspect had always saddened her, but now it seemed to her a paradise, since in leaving it she left behind something else without which the world to which she was going would never seem fair.

‘I am rightly punished,’ she groaned in her misery. ‘That which I sighed for has come to curse me. Oh, Ralph, my lost darling, would to heaven that I had died while you still believed me true.’

There is no need to prolong so painful a scene. Of all the rights which custom gives to parents, the cruellest is that which enables them to kill the heart and blight the life of a child.

Three days after Mr. Vanstone, as the nominal head of his family, communicated his doom to Ralph in the following letter.

‘DEAR MR. WELDON,’ wrote the obedient husband,—‘Since we have been here a complete revolution has taken place in our cir-

cumstances. My uncle has died, and on his will being read, it was found that he had left to me a great portion of his property. I fear that the congratulations upon this totally unexpected event which you would naturally hasten to offer us, will be arrested by what I have to communicate to you on another subject. It is not without great pain that we have arrived at a resolution, the justice of which, could you place yourself for a moment in the position of a parent, you would be forced to acknowledge. Helen is now the heiress to considerable wealth, and we should naturally desire her to make a brilliant alliance. Under these altered circumstances, the promise which she made you when our position was in accordance with your own, can hardly be held binding, even by the most rigid moralist. She sees this for herself, and empowers me to sever on her behalf a connection which can no longer be possible. I sympathise with you most deeply, and can anticipate the pain which will be caused by the receipt of this apparently heartless epistle. Time, however, will soften the blow, and enable you to see that we were only fulfilling

our duty as parents in taking this step. With best wishes for your future happiness and success in life from all, I remain, your very sincere friend,—GABRIEL VANSTONE.
P.S.—I will repay the small sums still due to you on my return to town.'

This model of courteous and cold-blooded composition was shown to Helen by her mother. The girl, with a flash of her old spirit, refused to look at it.

'What does it matter to me how you word it?' she said, the hot tears of misery and indignation starting to her eyes. 'The executioner might as well expect his victim to take an interest in the axe that is to destroy him.'

Mrs. Vanstone drew back, rather abashed by the scornful tones. 'You need not read it if you do not wish,' she mumbled in reply. 'I suppose you will write something to him yourself.'

'I shall; and when I have written it, it shall be shown to you.'

After those few words, the poor girl went up to her room, and, leaning her aching head upon her hand, endeavoured to collect her

thoughts sufficiently to enable her to compose this painful letter.

‘Poor fellow! I will word it so that he shall think me base and sordid, and unworthy of his love,’ she said at length to herself. ‘He will then be enabled to forget me the sooner. Thank heaven! men’s hearts are made of tougher fibre than ours, and do not break so easily; but *he* is not like other men, and I would spare him if I can the misery which must be mine.’

She wrote copy after copy without satisfying herself, but at last the following was determined upon,—

‘DEAR RALPH,—My father’s letter will convey to you the resolution at which I have arrived, but which I could not be so cruel as to write myself. Believe me, I have not acted thus without deliberation, without well weighing the chances of future happiness were I to remain faithful to the vows I made. But, Ralph, I was not born to be a poor man’s wife; and if I obeyed the dictates of my heart and came to you, I know that ere a year had passed, I should repent what I had done, bitterly regret the world I left to

come to you. I should bring to your hearth not peace and love but discontent and disdain: from this curse I spare you. That you may find one worthier of your love, one whose nobler nature and more loyal affection may make it easy to forget her who has caused you such suffering, is the prayer of

‘HELEN.’

She brought it down to her mother, and put it in her hand without a word. Needless to say, the contents surprised the reader much. ‘But I do not understand—’ she was beginning, when Helen stopped her in a proud voice.

‘It is all false, you would say. I know it; and I have written this because I wish him to suffer little,—to forget me soon, or at least to remember me without pain. When he reads that letter he will believe me as false in heart as you have made me in deed.’

She turned slowly away, still keeping in her eyes the proud look before which the other’s wavered and fell. She controlled herself until she regained her own room, where, yielding to nature, she burst into a passionate fit of weeping.



CHAPTER XXV.

A LAST APPEAL.

MR. VANSTONE brought back his family from Ramsgate to the house in Thomas Street, which they were so soon to quit, and whose dinginess could have no effect upon them now. Mrs. Vanstone was in her element, determining in what quarter of the town they should fix their abode, discussing the furniture, ordering new dresses for herself and Helen. The only person in the place whose heart was not gay was Helen herself.

It was a sultry summer evening : Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone had gone out to dine with Lady Grahame, who, since the contents of the will were revealed, had become their warmest friend, and had promised to usher

them into the society to which their wealth and connections now gave them a prospect of admittance. Helen had remained at home, under the plea of a headache. Her illness was an excuse. She was in reality too miserable to assume even the semblance of gaiety, and wished to be alone with her harassing thoughts. At last the close room, the house itself, became insupportable ; and putting on a light shawl, she went out into the little garden, where she had so often walked with Ralph in the mild evenings. The gate of this garden opened into a narrow piece of ground that extended the whole length of Thomas Street. She had only taken a few turns, when she heard her name pronounced by a voice that made her heart almost cease beating.

She stood rooted to the spot ; the power either of speech or movement seemed gone. Ralph Weldon came close to her, and, in the dim twilight, she could see through what a fiery ordeal he had passed.

‘ Helen,’ he began, taking her unresisting hand, and speaking in tones at once passionate and imploring,—‘ I received your father’s

cruel letter; nothing could have been more inexorable,—but in my despair I turned again to your own. In those few words I read hope, I read that you loved me still, that your falseness was due to a parent's commands, to a parent's threats. In a word, your mother is my enemy,—have I not read aright?’

She had recovered herself a little during this speech, enough to carry out the self-imposed task of lessening his misery at the price of her own degradation in his eyes. But the sweet, low tones trembled as she strove to commit this offence against her own nature.

‘She is not alone your enemy, Ralph; I am equally guilty.’

Poor child! the endurance of women is a thousandfold greater than that of men, or else how could she have resisted her desire to fall upon his breast, and confess that she loved him still with her whole heart and soul, and loathed the cursed wealth which dug a grave between them?

He dropped her hand, with a look in which scorn mingled with incredulity.

‘ Helen, I cannot believe that, even although your own lips confirm it. You whom I believed so pure, so true and guileless, to yield to the first whisper of temptation, to trample every noble feeling under foot, and turn into a sordid, calculating woman of the world ! Has all the past been the mere feigning of a clever actress ? the kisses in which our very souls seemed to meet, the half-shy, yet ever tender avowals of your love,—are these the things that carry with them no sacred memory ? Ambitious I knew you to be, in the sense in which women can alone display ambition ; but if my own brother had warned me that you would barter such true love as mine for the paltry baubles which await you in the world to which you are going, I would have called him a liar and a madman !’

He paused a moment, and then added, with increased vehemence,—

‘ By heaven, if I could be brought to believe that your heart concurred in what your pen wrote, I think I could learn to despise you !’

She looked up at him with a tremulous

smile,—‘ And if you despised me, my poor Ralph, as a base, sordid creature, you would cease to suffer.’

The tremulous smile, the suppressed anguish in her tone, came to him like a revelation. ‘ Will you swear to me that you have been allowed a choice ? ’ he asked, eagerly.

She was silent, not daring to perjure herself even for the end she sought. And now that she found herself face to face with his scorn, with the scorn of the man who so adored her, she felt that it would be too hard to bear.

‘ Will you swear ? ’ he repeated ; and then, as no answer came, a joyful light came into his eyes, and he seized the hand which he had let drop, and pressed it to his lips.

‘ Oh, my own darling, thank heaven that I was not deceived in your nature. Sooner would I suffer years of torment than live to know that the idol whom I deemed so spotless was stained and degraded in so foul a fashion. You love me still, it speaks in your eyes and in your voice ; and I owe my misery to another.’

‘Ralph, my poor love, we were born under an unlucky star,’ she said, speaking slowly between her tears, and looking up at him with a gaze that told more eloquently than words the anguish of her heart. ‘It is idle for me to dissemble any longer. Were I my own mistress, not all the world’s wealth should tempt me from your side. But there is no hope; my mother forbids our union, and would sooner see me dead than renounce her ambitious projects, which once so well chimed with my own heart. My first duty is to bow to her will, and there is nothing left for me but to obey and suffer.’

He interrupted her with a passionate vehemence. ‘Nothing left but to obey and suffer! Great heaven! Helen, can you be so bigoted in your notion of filial duty as to think that a mother has a right to blight two lives? Her harshness springs from her ignorance. Could she have had experience of the feeling which unites us, she would never bid you renounce me.’

He drew her closer to him, until her head nestled on his breast, and his lips touched her brow. ‘Oh, my sweet darling, do not

persist in this blind sacrifice of our happiness. Renounce this cursed wealth, and choose the better part ere it be too late. Do not charge your fate or mine upon another: you are a woman, with a woman's brain and will. It needs but your consent for us to be married secretly !'

Never was a more seductive temptation put within the reach of woman. To most, it would seem marvellous that, loving him as she did,—she could resist it, yet resist it she did. 'No, Ralph, that I could never do. My first duty is to her; again, I repeat, there is nothing left me and you but to obey and suffer.'

An angry flush rose to his brow; for a moment a doubt of her truth flashed back again into his heart. What was the love worth which could not dare this simple thing? And yet could he doubt her? Those tearful and troubled eyes, those broken tones, the passiveness with which she suffered his embrace, were they not all witness that she was indeed a self-devoted martyr, the slave to an influence which had been paramount through all her life?

‘Hear me yet again,’ he cried eagerly. ‘Your mother is ambitious for you. I will stoop to share her ambition. Give me time, two years, a year, and I will win the wealth which can buy her consent and make you mine. When I have won wealth, I can become anything you desire. I will not restrict myself to art; I will lend what talents I possess to win the fame and power which control the world you wish to enter. I will wait; you shall name the time yourself, place what restrictions you please upon me. I will not even look upon you till I can come and say,—“She who weds Ralph Weldon becomes the wife of no obscure man.” You weep, your heart revokes the cruel words which pronounce my doom, which condemn you to a cold and loveless life. Do not think that you will escape me in the future. I shall steal in upon it like a ghost from the grave, a ghost that will sadden and appal, whom no spells can exorcise. In the midst of glittering scenes, in the midst of solitude; surrounded by flatterers, or alone with the remorseful memories of bygone years, my accusing

spirit will rise before you, and my accusing words ring in your ears, reproaching you with having destroyed my happiness, and blasted my life. Helen, my darling, my only love, for whom I could lay down my life, give me an answer ! Bid me hope, bid me live, or condemn me to the living death that life will prove without you !'

He drew back, trembling like a girl, to wait for her reply, and on the dead silence her solemn words rang like the death knell of his hopes,—'I cannot, I *cannot* do what you ask !'

Then at those seemingly cruel words, his mood changed ; as it was perhaps but natural it should. He could not see into the depths of this girl's heart ; and how was it possible to believe in the love which refused to overleap so slight a barrier ? Wounded love and wounded pride made his voice sound hard and stern as he answered,—

'Then, farewell for ever to the bright, false dream of my life ! Henceforth the bitterest of my recollections will be, that the woman whom I so loved and honoured, until I thought her little lower than the angels,

was unworthy of the worship I lavished upon her. I have ambition, too, of a nobler kind than yours ; for were my aspirations to be crowned, I should at least achieve something worthy of being remembered ; while you, great as is your fatal beauty, can never be more than an idol of an hour, and the queen of a narrow world. But, heaven be my witness, could a tempter have offered me all that I sigh for, clogged with this one condition, that I would renounce you, I would have chosen to drudge on for ever in obscurity, rather than break my faith !'

He paused a moment, and the sound of her weeping alone disturbed the silence ; then he resumed in a still sterner tone,—

‘ You are cruel as you are beautiful, and have spoken away, with the same lips that but yesterday whispered vows of love, my hopes of happiness. I cannot part from you in charity, although so long as you remain without being faithless in deed, I wish you no harm ; but from the day that you give to another what you have denied to me, no evil that I can invoke upon you will be too great for my revenge. May your heart be wrung

as you have wrung my own ; may the world turn as black to you as it has turned to me ; may hope, joy, and peace wither from your life as they have withered from mine !'

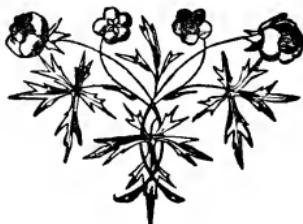
He turned as the last word of that solemn and bitter curse fell from his lips, and in a moment had scaled the low wall and was gone. She heard his retreating footsteps sound harshly on the gravel ; and then, seizing afresh, as it were, the sense of what that departure meant to her life, sent her voice after him in the faint cry—' Ralph, Ralph, my love ! come back to me !'

Too late ! too late ! He was already beyond the reach of those feeble accents. He strode with rapid steps to the end of the lane, and then halting for a moment, gazed at the tranquil heavens, such a contrast to his own stormy soul, to his mood of passion, hate, and despair.

' You smile now as you did on the night when I set my first kiss upon her false and perjured lips,' he muttered bitterly to himself. ' You smile when you ought to frown, in order to be in harmony with the misery that looks upon you ! '

And then, as he continued to gaze upon that smiling, tranquil beauty, and thought of the glorious time when his heart had been unprofaned by a doubt, for a moment his self-control gave way, and for the first time since he had hung over his mother's death-bed, this strong, resolute man wept like a child at the ruin of his hopes.

And this misery was all caused by a mother's ambition !



P A R T I I.

The World of Wealth.





CHAPTER XXVI.

THE NEW LIFE.

LADY GRAHAME, whose acquaintance we have made in a previous chapter, was as much astonished as everybody else at the contents of old Mr. Vanstone's will, and was in her heart rather sorry for Hugh Trevor, who was at present in Africa, unconscious of recent events. She resolved, however, that her relatives should not go astray for want of good advice. People with ten thousand a-year ought to make a decent figure in the world. She had refused to open her doors to Mrs. Vanstone when Gabriel's income had been under a third of that sum, but now she was prepared to receive her. In spite of Helen's cavalier treatment, her ladyship

had taken a liking to the girl, and thought it a pity she should be shut out from good society on her mother's account. She intimated as much in her most gracious manner to Mrs. Vanstone, and that astute woman received her overtures in the same pleasant spirit. She hated Lady Grahame like poison, as was natural; but they must have somebody to launch them into the strange waters, and what better pilot than her husband's near kinswoman. Lady Grahame, on her side, did not take very greatly to Mrs. Vanstone, but she rather pitied her for her misfortunes, and said as much.

Mrs. Vanstone smiled sarcastically. 'Yes, I think nineteen years of these ignoble surroundings have sufficiently expiated my presumption in marrying your cousin,' she answered.

Lady Grahame said no more. It was obvious that the linendraper's daughter was more than a match for her in repartee, and so great a lady had her dignity to maintain.

The fashionable world was just beginning to take its departure from London at the time when Michael Vanstone's will was read.

It was clear, therefore, that nothing could be done this season in the way of getting an entrance into good society, a fact for which Mrs. Vanstone was in her secret heart not ungrateful. She remembered her former experiences of essaying to mix with her social superiors, and dreaded that she might have to encounter the same humiliations now. But Mr. Vanstone took care to point out to her that the two cases were very different.

‘I have wealth enough now to make me somebody,’ he explained to his wife, ‘whereas in those days I had only what would be called a decent income. I was somebody so long as I did what the world did, nobody if I ran counter to its prejudices. Now I am somebody, whatever I do. Then Helen is beautiful enough to make a sensation. In a word, my dear,—you will excuse me for speaking so plainly,—you will not be so prominent a figure in our household as you would have been twenty years ago. Then you were young and handsome enough to provoke envy and malice.’

‘And now, I suppose, I am old and

withered enough to escape comment,' replied the wife, with a smile that had a little bitterness in it. 'I am sorry that we are obliged to go into society. I should have preferred to enjoy life after our own fashion; but, for Helen's sake, it must be done.'

So a house was taken at once in South Kensington, not far from the residence of Gabriel Vanstone's cousin, Lady Grahame; and the upholsterer and decorator were set busily at work. The furniture was costly and elegant, from the fact of their trusting less to their own taste in the matter than to that of the eminent west end firm who had undertaken to furnish the house from roof to basement. A staff of servants was engaged, including a butler of staid and dignified appearance, and two footmen, with the most symmetrical figures, and a splendid display of calf. Nobody could say but that here was plenty of material on which to found a fair social success, and the hope of a brilliant match for Helen.

'We will introduce you to all the people we can, and in time you will manage to get a good circle round you,' said his cousin's

husband, Sir Francis, in the last interview that Mr. Vanstone had with him, before he quitted his town mansion for his estate. It was astonishing how cordial Sir Francis had become; how pleasant were the tones of his voice; how friendly the shake of his hand. Before this sudden accession to wealth, his poor relative had seldom got more than a chilly nod from him.

Sir Francis continued, with the air of a man who thoroughly knows the world and its little weaknesses,—‘You must go in for good dinners, get a first-rate cook, and be very particular about your wines. Nothing gets a new-comer a quicker reputation than giving good feeds.’

Mr. Vanstone gave a small laugh, that was not entirely free from embarrassment. It was not pleasant to a man of his mature age to be instructed in these matters by a blunt and supercilious little gentleman, just as if he were a mere schoolboy, and had never been in good society before. Sir Francis, who was far too egotistical to believe that any advice he gave was not accepted with the greatest gratitude, proceeded,—

‘Rather awkward, your wife’s want of family. People are sure to ask each other, “Who is she?” And it’s useless making a mystery of the affair, for that would stimulate their curiosity, and set their wits and tongues working all the faster.’ Perhaps even Sir Francis would not have spoken so bluntly on this topic, had he not heard from his wife that Gabriel Vanstone had long ago repented his youthful indiscretion.

‘It is awkward; the truth is, I made a mistake,’ was the husband’s candid reply; and in this frank confession he did not take an absolutely unfair advantage of his wife, for Mrs. Vanstone, in dwelling upon her own matrimonial trials and disappointments, had made use of very similar words for the last twenty years.

‘But still, if she dresses quietly and in good taste, does not disagree with people, nor differ from them too pointedly, I have no doubt she will pull through very well,’ mused the baronet. ‘Your daughter is really a splendid girl, Vanstone; takes more after the Vanstones, I should say, than after the—I really forget the name of your wife’s

family, although I must have heard it in the course of my life.'

'Tubbs,' replied his cousin, in a voice of acute shame.

'Tubbs!' repeated Sir Francis, with a scornful emphasis that would have made Mrs. Vanstone hate him to the day of her death had she heard it. 'Miss *Tubbs*! Good heavens! my dear fellow, how *could* you have fallen in love with a Miss *Tubbs*?'

'A rose by any other name, you know,' explained the husband, awkwardly.

'But it doesn't, you know,' said the baronet, testily. 'I don't believe in all the bosh that is talked by poets. In this world, there's everything in a name. Still, it cannot be helped; you made a foo—a mistake, as you say yourself, and you must put up with the consequences. Helen will be really the leading female spirit of your household.'

'She is a clever girl—witty, and clever at repartee,' said the father.

'I have seen that for myself,' replied Sir Francis, who, like all vain and egotistical men, could not bear to receive or seem to

stand in need of information. ‘She ought to make a deuced good match. By the way, did I not hear from my wife that she had been engaged to some fellow in the city?’

‘She was ; but that was broken off by us at once,’ replied the father, not taking the trouble to correct the mistake as to Ralph Weldon’s occupation.

‘Quite right, quite right. City fellows, as a rule, are horrid cads. One is obliged to receive a few of the best kind, of course ; they have got so confoundedly wealthy, that one cannot shut them out,’ said Sir Francis, with an aggrieved air ; adding, as he shook hands with his wife’s cousin, ‘So, you don’t intend to come and stay with us for a while?’

‘I think not ; thanks. My daughter is not in very good health just now, and a little travelling about will do her good.’

So the Vanstones went abroad during the winter. It was better that they should do so for the sake of Helen, whose health had been somewhat seriously shattered by the renunciation of Ralph Weldon, and it was an arrangement that suited the mother better. For Mrs. Vanstone shrank from the ordeal

of visiting at a country house, the mistress of which had a thinly-veiled contempt for the daughter of a linendraper. In London society, the part she would have to play would be comparatively small ; in nine cases out of ten she would only be an unit among a crowd, except in her own house, where her guests could not openly snub her. But at Lady Grahame's she would have been continually brought in contact with people who would treat her with that contemptuous toleration, which the world extends to those it dislikes, yet is forced to endure.

The following season saw them ensconced in their new mansion, and preparing to enter society under the auspices of Sir Francis and Lady Grahame. They were not totally unexpected by the small world of which they aspired to become a portion. The industrious *flaneurs* of drawing-rooms and clubs soon collected all it was possible to gather ; so that everybody who cared to acquire the information, soon learned that the Vanstones had been living for many years in a humble manner, that Mrs. Vanstone was a person of no family, and that Helen was a girl of sur-

passing beauty. Let nobody flatter himself, after this, that his acquaintance can be hoodwinked with regard to the past.

But to the man who has ten thousand a-year, and one lovely daughter to inherit it, society is not disposed to be churlish. Mr. Vanstone might be a fool, Mrs. Vanstone a *parvenue*; but Helen was at once a lady, a beauty, and an heiress,—an irresistible combination.

In a short time, our heroine became the rage. Charlie Morris, considered the handsomest man of his day, and a leader of the *Jeunesse dorée*, pronounced her to be the loveliest girl in London; and all the young men who took Charlie Morris for their model (and their name was legion), said the same. Dozens of susceptible young gentlemen fell violently in love with her. The Honourable Alfred Rimester, who wrote such charming *vers de société*, invoked his muse in her praise. Dowagers caressed her, in the hope of getting her for their penniless sons. The large majority of the contemporaries of her own age hated her cordially, for gaining more admiration than themselves.

She tasted all the sweets of wealth and

popularity. Her days and nights were devoted to the laborious pursuit of pleasure,—riding in the Row, calls, afternoon teas, dinner-parties, dances. What a contrast was this bright, idle, pleasure-seeking world,—in which the sole aim of life is to amuse and be amused, to the life in Thomas Street! A gulf lay between them, as wide as the gulf which separates dreamland from reality.

It was a repetition of Cinderella's slipper,—one moment ignoble surroundings, the next a prince for a wooer. She had all the things which she had pictured in her youth as necessary to a happy life,—horses, carriages, spacious saloons, a retinue of servants, cultivated and refined acquaintance. And this radiant young creature looked and acted like one to the manner born. She trod the saloons into which she entered for the first time with the air of a queen. She received the homage of her admirers as if she had been used to homage from her cradle. Her worst enemy could not accuse her of *gaucherie*, awkwardness, or vulgarity. And all this time that she was fêted, courted, and

admired,—the acknowledged queen of beauty,—was she happy or not? But before we answer that question, we will say a word or two about Mrs. Vanstone.

This lady very soon conceived a disgust for good society, especially the female portion. We do, as a rule, conceive a disgust for those who look down upon us; and it would have been obvious to a much sharper woman than Mrs. Vanstone, that in this new world she counted for nobody, in spite of her jewels and costly dresses.

If there is one thing fashionable people do fight shy of, it is retail trade, and it had soon become known that she was the daughter of a shopkeeper. Now, to do her justice, Mrs. Vanstone, when on her company manners, was as free from vulgarity as half the women who despised her. But in private life many judgments are arrived at through prejudice; and fine ladies, who thought they knew, said among themselves that she was not a gentlewoman, simply because they had previously made up their minds that, from the accident of her birth, it would be impossible for her to be one.

This kind of searching criticism is not, however, confined to fine ladies.

The poor woman soon grew thoroughly miserable. She, who was so autocratic in her domestic circle, was as embarrassed as a little girl abroad. She was perpetually on the watch to guard herself from committing any small social mistake which would give her enemies an excuse for censure. She felt nervous even before her own servants. Was it not possible that this impassive butler, these seemingly deferential footmen, her own maid, had contracted, from their long service, a secret power of detecting a sham lady? It is so easy for the social novice to commit blunders at the table, even in salutation, in a thousand minute points of etiquette. Her last thought on going to bed came to be, 'I wonder if I have said or done anything to-day that showed ignorance of this new life?' This distrust of herself hung over her head like a sword of Damocles, and poisoned all personal delight.

But, if wealth did not bring her complete happiness on her own account, her passionate delight in the social success of her child made

ample amends. As she watched her riding away to the Row, lighting up a ball or fête with her dazzling beauty, or receiving the homage of her admirers like a graceful young queen, her heart beat high with gratified affection and vanity. It was worth enduring greater mortification than she endured now, to be a witness to the triumph of her beloved daughter. A thousand times did she congratulate herself on the firmness she had displayed. It was as clear as the sun at noonday that a brilliant future lay in store for Helen, if she should resolve to avail herself of it. The daughter of the linendraper experienced a joy almost delirious in its intensity as she pictured the prospect of her child becoming enrolled by marriage amongst the peeresses of England. Yes, it would be folly for a girl with her pretensions to accept a husband who could not offer her a coronet either now or hereafter.

Nobody tastes the joys of ambition to such perfection as a *parvenue*, for to the *parvenue* alone do all the good things of this world,—the honour, the power, the applause of our fellow-creatures, come with a delicious sense

of novelty. They prize all these so highly, because they remember so vividly the time when they believed them to be unattainable. The ambition of a *parvenue* mother has no limits, nor, it may be added, the ambition of a *parvenue* daughter. And thus Mrs. Vanstone, although she saw what others could not suspect, that this poor girl's heart was breaking with the memories of the past, could still congratulate herself on her firmness, and hold herself prepared to break that heart utterly when an opportunity should arrive.

So it would appear that there was another person to whom wealth did not bring complete happiness, and that the person who ought to have reaped the greatest benefit from it—poor Helen herself. This new life was just what she had pictured in her fairy dreams. It was exactly suited to her beauty, her grace, her accomplishments. It was gratifying to know that she was universally acknowledged the *belle* of the season. She could not suppress a thrill of vanity when she saw her portrait, painted by the first painter of the day, in the Academy, and heard people whisper to each other, 'What

a lovely girl !' She numbered among her acquaintance plenty of nice people,—Jack Trenchant, the gigantic and genial hussar, young Mr. Pastoral, the fashionable novelist, Lord Foppleton, the idol of the fair sex, and the best-dressed man in London,—and several other lions of the day. But strange as it may seem, amid all these agreeable surroundings, witching the world with lady-like horsemanship in the Row, disposing of her dances to an eager crowd of candidates,—in the society of the handsome Charlie Morris and the elegant Foppleton, she thought continually of a poor, struggling artist, working away, alas ! not with his old cheerfulness, in a little cottage at Richmond ; a poor, struggling artist, whom this world did not care a farthing about, but whose pictures it would hasten to buy to-morrow if he became famous.

Singular, no doubt, this fidelity (Mrs. Vanstone would have called it obstinacy) in a girl whose ambition had once been so great ! How potent must have been the love that could thus transform her nature, could compel her to own to herself that to become

Ralph Weldon's wife, she would renounce for ever this bright and luxurious world, into which she once imagined it would be bliss to enter. Alas ! in this disappointing paradise, there were no friends like the beloved friend of a humbler Eden, and the dreaming in his company was better than the reality apart from him.

The third and last member of this small family to whom wealth did not bring complete happiness was the nominal head of it. It was pleasant to be waited upon by attentive servants, to smoke the best cigars and drink the choicest wines, but he could have secured all these luxuries with a very much less income. Naturally a shy and awkward man, Gabriel Vanstone was not fitted to shine in society ; and he had so long lived a Bohemian life, that he found it difficult to renew the habits of his youth. He hated having to attend dinner-parties, and give parties in return ; he had neither tact nor address sufficient to enable him to play the *rôle* of host gracefully, and he knew it. He would have liked to spend the evening in the smoking-room of his club ; and instead of

following his inclinations, he had perforce to array himself in conventional attire, and accompany his womenkind to some assembly where he was immensely bored. Once Helen overheard him muttering wrathfully to himself, on the occasion of a grand party, 'Damn it, I think Thomas Street was the better of the two. One was poor but free ; here one is rich and a slave.'

It will thus be seen that Michael Vans-
töne's capricious alteration of his will had
not produced such perfect happiness as
usually goes with ten thousand a-year. It
had disappointed the natural heir ; it had
parted two lovers who adored each other ; it
had entailed upon a poor old man duties and
responsibilities which were a burden ; and it
had mixed with a mother's legitimate pride
the poisonous alloy of personal mortification.
But such results as these are only too com-
mon when people insist on seeking happiness,
not after their own fashion, but after that of
other people.



CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FIRST SEASON.



MANSION in one of the South Kensington Squares was lighted up in that brilliant and general fashion which tells that more than ordinary festivities are going on inside. On the pavement was clustered a fair sprinkling of curious loungers, who took a keen delight in watching the various carriages deposit their freight,—grand old dowagers in far-reaching trains and flashing jewels, old and young gentlemen in the stiffest of ties and the most spotless of linen; here and there a graceful figure and a beautiful face that caused a momentary thrill to run through the sympathetic crowd. This mansion was the residence of Sir Francis Grahame, and this was his wife's first grand ball of the season.

The soft lights fell upon a rich and sparkling sea of colour, and laces, and jewels, as the guests moved hither and thither through the spacious rooms. The scene was full of animation and gaiety, one on which all healthy youth must ever gaze with delight, for the pleasures of the ball-room are such as can only be enjoyed with the keenest zest by the young. In after life people whose sole connection with such a scene arises from the fact of having to accompany their children there, are apt to only regard it as a convenient place for the setting on foot of matrimonial treaties. But to the young it is a place of tender associations, a place where the heart bounded and the cheek grew bright at a word whispered by loved lips, where the unwearied feet have kept time to the strains of the inspiring music until day poured its light upon the dancers, where perfume and sweet sounds, the glances from bright and loving eyes, the glad laughter from gay and beautiful lips, seem to turn it into an earthly paradise.

Helen Vanstone stood and gazed upon the brilliant scene with a heightened colour

and a quickened pulse. Her thoughts flew back to the time when she had last made one among her cousin's guests. Then she was the daughter of a poor man, arrayed in a cheap toilet, conscious of her poverty, shrinking from notice, and yet sore at heart because it was not extended to her. Under what different auspices did she enter these rooms now ! Surrounded with the golden halo of wealth, a beauty and an heiress, whose smiles would confer honour, the privilege of whose hand would be contested by eager aspirants.

The band struck up the bright and joyous strains of the last new waltz by Straus, and Helen and her father moved back a few paces to let the dancers pass with greater freedom. Hardly had she done so when Lady Grahame came up to her, escorted by a young gentleman.

'Helen, my dear, let me present Mr. Courtenay to you.'

It may be mentioned that perfect cordiality had been established between Lady Grahame and her young relative. Helen had explained that much of her

former apparent rudeness had arisen from the turbulence of a suspicious and discontented spirit, and had apologised for it with so charming a grace, that resentment was out of the question.

Helen looked up and saw standing before her a young man, whom all judges of masculine beauty would have called remarkably handsome. Curly hair, of a dark brown colour, clustered in profusion over a head that would have served as a model for a sculptor ; deep blue eyes, whose expression was constantly shifting, as if keeping records of the mood within ; a mouth, perfect in shape, but a little too large for complete harmony with the rest of his features, made up the portrait of Granville Courtenay. The whole face, more of a soft than a vigorous type of beauty, was saved from the charge of effeminacy by the strength and determination expressed in the firm set of the jaw, while the breadth of the chest and shoulders told that he would prove as formidable a foe in the field as he had proved himself an acceptable gallant in the drawing-room.

He requested her hand for the next

dance, and she promised it to him. There was, in this young man's manner, that winning courtesy and polish which come only from continual contact with refined female society. Her first impressions of her new acquaintance were favourable, for he seemed to unite a native manliness with the ease and finished bearing of the man of fashion. They danced together, and Mr. Courtenay proved himself as perfect in the art of waltzing as in that of small talk. Helen, to whom dancing seemed the most delicious pastime on earth, felt that, did etiquette permit it, she should like to waltz on for an hour with a partner who so thoroughly understood her step, and guided her with such skill through all the obstacles of the crowded room. Not until the last notes had ceased did they rest ; and then Mr. Courtenay led her into a cool retreat of rocks and ferns, built out over a projection of the house, and watched with more than ordinary admiration the beauty of the girl beside him.

The exercise, and her delight in it, had lent a delicate flush to the fair cheeks, and

brought a soft sparkle into the dark eyes, which gave to her loveliness an almost magical effect. Granville Courtenay had seen plenty of beautiful girls,—had lost his heart for a few weeks to several of them ; but he thought that, except in painting or in poetry, he had never seen nor read of any beauty equal to that of Helen Vanstone.

‘ You have not grown weary of dancing yet, Miss Vanstone ? ’

‘ Weary of dancing ! certainly not ; I never shall. Have you ? ’

‘ Except when one gets so good a partner as yourself.’

She acknowledged the compliment with a smile. ‘ Thank you. But you ought never to get weary, for you dance so perfectly.’

‘ People generally get tired of those things they do well. Richelieu’s ambition was to hear the world praise his writings, you know.’

‘ If it is not a rude question, what is your ambition ? ’ asked Helen.

‘ I have no particular ambition, Miss Vanstone.’

‘ I am sorry to hear it, for I have always

held the opinion that all young people, especially young men, should have some aim in life. Would you not like to go into Parliament ?'

' No, thank you,' replied Granville Courtenay, shaking his head, with an amused smile. ' To sit till the small hours of the morning, listening to a set of prosy gentlemen, who are competing among themselves for the distinction of who shall waste most of the public time, is not my idea of happiness.'

' But you would be serving your country,' suggested Helen, gravely.

' My country would not be much benefited by the poor services of Granville Courtenay. She has physicians enough at her bedside.'

' There is the army,' said the girl, after a pause.

' I have tried it,' answered Mr. Courtenay, in a listless tone.

' And did you not like it ? Were you not in a nice regiment ?'

' I was in what is considered one of the "nicest," the Second Life.'

' And you got tired of it, I suppose.'

' Not exactly, Miss Vanstone. I had

hardly reached the weary stage when I had to sell out. The Second Life is always an expensive regiment ; but in my time it contained a set of fellows who were unbounded in their extravagance. I went with the stream, of course, like a foolish young man as I was, and found that if I swam much further I should sink. Having a remnant of common sense left, I sold out, and turned civilian.'

'From what you have told me,' said Helen, with a satirical expression, that made her look very charming in the eyes of her companion, 'I should gather that you are one of those unhappy beings who never quite know what to do with their time.'

'I find myself in that strait sometimes, I must confess,' replied Mr. Courtenay, coolly, in the hope that he might draw forth some more of the satire that was very *piquante* coming from her.

'Have you ever tried the old-fashioned remedy of—work ?'

'I have, and found it answer on several occasions. I once went in for hard travelling, and found it delightful for a while.

I then went in for severe study in the sciences, and sat up half the night “burning the midnight oil ;” that also interested me greatly—for a while. But my great drawback is want of steady application ; I can never keep long to any one thing. This fickleness is inherited from my ancestors : the Courtenays are an unstable race.’

‘I think idleness has much to do with it,’ said Helen, gravely. ‘Years ago I happened to come into contact with several people who had to earn their bread before they ate it, and I never found among them that weariness which seems the prevailing malady of young men whose fortune has been made for them.’

‘You are evidently a youthful philosopher,’ said Courtenay, with a gay smile. ‘I have gone in for philosophy too, like Claude Melnotte ; have become “a student o’er the midnight dreams of sages.”’

‘Perhaps you had no Pauline to sweeten your studies ?’ said Helen, who was not aware that he was a widower.

His face clouded for a moment, and he

answered in a less gay tone, 'I am afraid that a Pauline, however beautiful and fascinating, would not help to make her lover studious. I believe the happiest people are those who never fall in love.'

'I am disposed to agree with you,' answered the girl, with a tremour in her voice, for those few words of her companion touched the old wound with the sharp stab of a knife.

The place suddenly grew unsupportable to her.

'I hear the music beginning for the next dance, will you take me back, please?' she said, rising quickly.

Mr. Courtenay rose the reverse of quickly to comply with her request. He was beginning to get very interested in this girl, whose talk was *piquante* and original—above the average of young lady conversation.

'You will be generous enough to spare me another dance?' he asked.

'With pleasure; shall it be a waltz or a quadrille?'

'If it is the same to you, I would prefer a quadrille; one can talk so much easier.'

A waltz demands all the faculties of the mind at once.'

Helen leaned back in her seat when he had left her, and for some moments surrendered herself to the bitter memories which had been excited by the careless words of her companion. And as she sat there alone with her miserable thoughts, the glaring lights died out; the laughing tones of the gay circle fell unheeded on her ears; her gaze rested upon the richly-apparelled throng, and saw them not,—and she was standing once more amid the flowers and twilight shadows, with Ralph Weldon's arm around her—her eyes filling with tears as she felt again in fancy his first passionate kiss, and heard the tremour in his deep voice as he told her the story of his love.

The music ceased with a loud crash, and brought her back from dreamland, from the old to the new life, to that for which she had been forced to barter such a love as seldom falls to the lot of woman. Was it for the right to enter such saloons as these, to be a figure in such a scene as this, to listen to the compliments of fashionable

men, to excite the envy of fashionable women with her grace and beauty, that she had thrown away the priceless treasure, a true and noble heart?

Was the life which she had got in exchange worth the sacrifice she had made, the wrong she had been forced to inflict? Was existence a fairer thing to her because a score of well-dressed men competed for the honour of her hand in the next dance, because she swept through the rooms in a toilet that had cost more than their former income, because ere she went from the scene of her triumph, Lady Grahame whispered in her ear that common consent had proclaimed her the *belle* of the room?

‘How do you like Granville Courtenay?’ asked the voice of her relative close to her ear. The girl started with the air of one who is suddenly roused from a dream, and answered rapidly, half confusedly,—

‘Very well; at least, I have hardly had time enough to form an opinion about him. He seems very pleasant and gentlemanly.’

‘You have not added that which is his chief merit in the eyes of young ladies, his

good looks,' said Lady Grahame, smiling; then as Helen made no answer, she continued,—‘ He is immensely popular in society,—with daughters, for his own sake; with mothers, for the sake of his fortune, which, I daresay you have heard, is very large. He could find a wife in five minutes if he chose, but he is fastidious, and declares that he has not yet met with his ideal.’

‘ Poor young man!’ said Helen, smiling absently. Her content in the gay scene before her had been rudely shattered by the bitter memories of the past, and her thoughts wandered far away from the subject of her relative’s light gossip. But Lady Grahame, not noticing this, continued to dilate upon the theme of Granville Courtenay.

‘ I introduced him to you, my dear, because I thought you were just the sort of girl who would be likely to take his fancy,’ she said, dropping her voice to a confidential whisper. ‘ It would not be easy to do better; there is only one life between him and a barony, his family is one of the oldest in England, and his estate brings him in

over thirty thousand a-year. His personal qualifications are, of course, too patent to require eulogy.'

Much to Helen's relief, Lady Grahame's duties as hostess did not allow her to remain by her side any longer. The thought of marriage was doubly hateful to the girl at a moment when her heart was filled with the recollections of the old days, that seemed fairer still from the reason that they were gone for ever from her life.

Granville Courtenay came to claim her hand for the dance she had promised him, and it would have required a keener eye than his to discover the emotions which had ruffled her breast since he had been amused by her *piquante* talk and quick repartee. She was already beginning to acquire the art of making her face a mask to baffle both the curious and the pitying.

But when the dance with him was ended, she went back to where Mrs. Vanstone, clad in costly robes, might have passed for a Duchess, so far as mere appearance went, and said,—'Mamma, if you have no objection, I should like to go now.'

‘Very well, my dear.’ The mother was heartily tired of the scene herself. The wealth she had so long sighed for had its disadvantages, like other good gifts of fortune, which seem at first sight to contain only unmitigated blessing, and not the least among them was the necessity of having to sit and smile blandly, while her daughter was enjoying herself in the society of young gentlemen.

Lady Grahame came up and protested against so early a departure, but Helen was inexorable, pleading as a reason a severe headache.

‘You are a very naughty girl,’ said her hostess, half angrily; adding,—‘And everybody has been saying that you are the *belle* of the evening, too! It is really too bad, Helen.’

Granville Courtenay happened to pass them at that moment, and Lady Grahame turned round and appealed to him.

‘My cousin insists upon leaving us, Mr. Courtenay, even at the risk of incurring my serious displeasure. I wish that you would

join me in persuading her to stay a little longer.'

Mr. Courtenay smiled as he answered, 'Were Miss Vanstone a different kind of young lady from what she is, I should find in your invitation an opening for a pretty speech. But in our brief acquaintance, she has exhibited powers of satire and perception which make me a little afraid of her. Still, even at the risk of provoking her sarcasm, I will venture to say that when she departs, this scene will be deprived of one of its greatest attractions.'

'I cannot think I am so necessary to it as you flatteringly declare,' said Helen, with a faint smile; then extending her hand to her cousin, she added,—

'You must really forgive me, dear Lady Grahame. I assure you I am suffering too much to contribute either to my own amusement or that of others; good-bye. Good night, Mr. Courtenay.'

With a sudden impulse, she held out her hand to him, as she might have done in her old Bohemian days to a man whom she had only danced with twice. Mr. Courtenay

took it, and bowed over it, with the grace of a finished gentleman, as he was.

‘Good night, Miss Vanstone. I hope we shall meet again soon. In fact, we are sure to do that, for the world of society is a small one.’





CHAPTER XXVIII.

GRANVILLE COURTENAY.

GRANVILLE COURTENAY was one of those rare beings, on whom the goddess of fortune seems to smile with constant sweetness from the cradle to the grave ; who obtain success and applause without effort ; who are followed through life by the goodwill of men and the love of women. The only child of a fond father, and a doting mother, every whim had been indulged, every wish gratified. It was a proof of his good disposition, that he was less disagreeable than the majority of children reared under such conditions.

At the age of fourteen he went to Harrow. They were the old bullying days then, in

which big fellows considered it a duty to display their manliness by making the lives of little boys as miserable as they could. Every other new boy nearly was kicked, cuffed, and terrified into a state of abject submission ; but Master Courtenay's star carried him triumphantly through this, as through all other ills. He had not been at his new abode much above a fortnight, when he began to display some remarkable gifts. Will the reader smile when he hears that these gifts consisted of a correct understanding of the relations between a piece of wood and a piece of leather. To speak less enigmatically, Granville Courtenay proved himself a wonderful cricketer ; could guard his wicket with scientific skill, and hit his balls with wonderful precision. At this and other venerable seats of learning, to be a great cricketer is to be enrolled at once among the aristocracy of boyhood, an aristocracy which possesses this advantage over other similar bodies in the world, that it is recruited solely from merit, and is not hereditary.

Master Courtenay, then, found a short cut to the good opinion of his fellows with his

bat. Having vindicated his claim to the possession of muscle, he next condescended to show that he had brain, by going through the forms with a celerity that astonished his less studious companions of the cricket and the football field. Long before he left the scene of his triumphs, it was universally agreed that he was the brightest and most particular star that had ever shone in the Harrow firmament. His fame lingers still among the youth of that renowned seminary, as the fame of Arthur lingers in romance, as the fame of O'Connell still lives in the remotest corners of Ireland. The scores he made, the 'chaws' he thrashed, the prizes he took, are not these among the unwritten traditions of the place ?

Being destined for the army, he did not proceed to either University ; but on leaving Harrow, obtained a commission in the Guards, and devoted himself to cricket and the ladies. His manners had that peculiar charm which is the secret of social success, and which is to men what beauty is to women. Girls thought him delightful for his own sake ; their mammas thought him

delightful too, both for his own sake and that of his father's sixteen thousand a-year.

Many young ladies fell in love with him, and many would gladly have married him without that preliminary, but the young gentleman was in no hurry to surrender his liberty. He was somewhat of a flirt, and liked roving where he pleased in the gardens of beauty. His experiences of the tender passion were merely agreeable episodes in a life full of enjoyment ; of the love that consumes and keeps the patient in a perpetual fever he had no idea, until he met one of the queens of his world—the Marchioness of Hillshire.

This lady was a young widow of twenty-five, possessed of an ample fortune,—handsome, dashing and original in her modes of action and thought. Her late husband was an amiable noodle, who adored her, and next to her his horses and dogs. Ill-natured people were heard to say that in her case the order of affection was reversed—that she made pets of animals, and a slave of the husband. Be this as it may, the Marquis was perfectly happy, and since he was con-

tent, nobody else had a right to complain. The Marchioness was happy, too, in her way. She hunted with her husband, was an accomplished whip, and the idol of the poor around her. Her manners were a little too blunt and free for aristocratic demeanour; and dowagers of the old school, and prudes of the new, shook their heads and whispered that she was 'fast.' Of that there was no doubt.

The Marquis broke his neck in the hunting-field, and his widow, after the usual interval of mourning, re-entered society, where, in spite of her 'fastness,' her social gifts and great station made her a bright particular star. Granville Courtenay was twenty-four when they met, and they fell desperately in love with each other,—she with his splendid figure, his good looks, his bright, genial manners, he with what he could not exactly define to himself, but what it is not difficult to define for him. Had the lady been Miss Hillshire instead of the Marchioness of that ilk, he would not have looked at her twice. But, unconsciously to himself, his vanity was tickled by the pre-

ference shown him by so great a lady. Mr. Courtenay was a great man in his own estimation, and amongst the democratic society of his young compeers—a society in which the king reigns by merit—he was greater than any Marquis, and set the fashion to lords themselves; but in the world he was only a plain country gentleman of ample fortune, and Marchionesses generally look higher than plain country gentlemen.

He was intoxicated with the honour accorded him. What was in reality only gratified vanity took the form of devoted homage. Noble admirers crowded round the brilliant widow, who kept her frowns for them and her smiles for Courtenay. After some weeks of lover-like doubt and trepidation, he plucked up courage to propose. The Marchioness was only too glad to say 'yes,' and the young guardsman was in the seventh heaven of bliss. So was his father, who began to entertain the notion that the Government ought to reward his steady adherence with a baronetcy at least. There is little doubt he would have obtained this small favour had he not died

before he could put his scheme in proper train.

Granville Courtenay was married to his fair Marchioness, and discovered in time that she had a temper, and also a pretty clear notion that she had condescended in marrying a commoner totally undistinguished beyond the small world of good society. He also found that a hunting and driving wife was not so much to his taste as he once imagined. A nearer view alters the aspect of things. What may seem brilliant in a mistress, sometimes appears bold and unwomanly in a wife. Courtenay's ideal type of woman was rather of the Cordelia and Juliet kind. A low voice, that 'excellent thing in woman,' was not one of the Marchioness's possessions. If the real truth must be told about so great a lady, she was just a little vulgar; and when the glamour had worn off, her husband could not help perceiving it. Still it would be absurd to say this fact made him profoundly uneasy. He was amiable and easy enough to have got along tolerably with a Xantippe had fate given him so gentle a helpmeet; and the Marchioness, although at times im-

petuous, hot, and occasionally ill-bred, was far from being a Xantippe. Besides, she loved him as well as she could love anybody, and Courtenay was one of those men in whom love begets love.

When, therefore, his wife died suddenly from bronchitis, caught in driving him to the station on a bleak, wintry day, he honestly mourned her, and remembered none but her good qualities. He drowned his grief in foreign travel, and, when he returned, his friends remarked that he was much more sobered in manner. The world of young men welcomed him back as their leader, the young ladies smiled sweetly on him (for had not the Marchioness bequeathed to him all her ample fortune ?), and the mammas tried to catch him.

His acquaintance lay chiefly amongst those who may be called the votaries of pleasure ; the young men who devote their talents to the making a book, driving four-in-hands, lounging in the park and at clubs, and paying their court to the ladies. But he had also friends among a more industrious class, —members of Parliament, young attachés,

Government officials,—who informed him that public life was the one thing necessary, and prophesied that he had only to open his mouth to make himself famous. Mr. Courtenay smiled, shook his head, and, by way of showing that he had not forgotten his classics, quoted to them from the first satire of Horace, and added that he for one was perfectly content with the present, and disinclined to court the perilous sweets of fame. ‘The happiness of life consists in liberty: the public man is a slave,’ said he, by way of conclusion. Of course his industrious friends thought him a spiritless fellow, but his other friends were glad to keep him amongst them, and heartily approved his resolution.

Perhaps he was right in eschewing ambition, and estimated his powers better than his acquaintance. His gifts were of the social kind, and he would have made a splendid ambassador, if he could have brought himself to the small tricks of diplomacy. In the saloon he was a power and a leader. So the years passed, and his life flowed on in an agreeable though uneventful manner. He had nothing better to do than kill time, so

he killed it with dining, dancing, racing, reading, lounging. If he had possessed three hundred a-year he might have shone in a large world ; possessing thirty thousand, he shone in a small one.





CHAPTER XXIX.

A NEW LOVER.

BOWLING along a smooth, level road, at the rate of ten miles an hour, on a summer afternoon,—not too hot, but just tempered to perfection by a soft, refreshing wind, is, or ought to be, an exhilarating process. At any rate, Helen Vanstone felt in the best of spirits, as she sat by the side of Granville Courtenay, who was driving his team of four hard-pulling chesnuts as coolly as if they had been a pair of the quietest ponies. The day was a lovely one,—all that could be desired for an excursion of this kind. The dust was a little annoying at times, and the tiny specks of cloud that floated lazily over the sun's glowing face were not numerous enough to conceal it for long; but then, the

exquisite green of the fields and waving foliage, and the balmy scents that were wafted unceasingly by the grateful wind, compensated for the too great heat. South Kensington was very different from Thomas Street; but Helen's eyes had grown weary of stucco and paint and conservatories, and yearned to gaze upon the fair, fresh face of Nature; and the fashion in which she was gazing on it to-day, from the top of Mr. Courtenay's drag, was one in harmony with her nature.

It will be seen, from her presence there, that they had become very intimate in the interval between the night of Lady Grahame's ball and now. The world of society, as he had remarked to her at the time, is a small one, and people who take a liking to each other soon get opportunities of becoming more closely acquainted. Granville Courtenay was now a frequent guest at her father's house, and drifting more rapidly than he liked into love.

‘Mind you don't upset us as you did about this spot two years ago, Granville!’ cried a young lady on the other side of him.

The voice belonged to Miss Blanche Maynard, Courtenay's cousin, and one of those peculiar productions of the nineteenth century called 'fast girls.' Miss Maynard was a young lady who hunted, flirted, and went in for anything that required a boldness and daring not usually associated with the feminine temperament. For the rest, she was a handsome brunette, with a splendid supple figure, and dark thrilling eyes that it was not prudent for a man to look into too often, if he valued his own peace of mind;—for Blanche was as remorseless a coquette as ever lived, and trampled on hearts without the slightest compunction.

'You are too late, Blanche; we passed the fatal place more than a quarter of a mile back,' said Courtenay gaily, as he flicked the wheelers with his whip. 'But it is too bad of you to descant upon my iniquities before Miss Vanstone; black care will sit behind her for the rest of the journey.'

'Oh, I rather like a spill now and then,—it makes an agreeable change!' cried Miss Blanche, as heartily as if she had been saying, 'I like diamonds.'

‘Do you speak from experience?’ asked Helen, smiling. She had met Miss Maynard very often at Lady Grahame’s, and had taken a great fancy to her. For although fast, flippant, and a remorseless coquette, the girl was good-hearted, and a charming companion when she chose.

‘From a great and varied experience. The history of my moving accidents by flood and field would fill a good-sized volume. But I am a soldier’s daughter, and love danger for its own sake.’

‘It does not follow, though, that because you are a soldier’s daughter, you should harrow the nerves of your fellow-passengers, whose fathers labour under the disadvantage of being civilians,’ said Courtenay, smiling. ‘You are a woman of ten thousand, Blanche, and belong to the Joan of Arc and the Maid of Saragossa species. You have come into the world after your time; in the middle ages you would have been a heroine.’

‘I would sooner have been Brehilda, the wife of Count Robert of Paris,’ replied Miss Maynard, laughing.

‘Because you would have had a better

opportunity of showing what a fine horse-woman you were.'

'Not exactly,' replied Miss Maynard, with a heightened colour; 'but because I could have fought by the side of the man I loved, and helped to defend him from his foes.'

'The man you loved!' repeated her cousin, with a provoking smile. 'You are a coquette, Blanche, and coquettes never love.'

'It matters little whether they do or not,' said the girl, with a curl of her lip. 'One thing is very certain, the present age does not contain many men worthy of a woman's love. Our modern youth are a bad set,—selfish, fickle, tyrannical, dissolute.'

'How do you feel after all that, Somers?' asked Courtenay, turning to a young man, who had the moustache and the air of 'heavy cavalry.'

'Rather uncomfortable,' replied Captain Somers, with an appealing look at Blanche, who took no notice of it. For the last five years the love-stricken Captain had haunted her like her shadow at opera, fête, and ball. Blanche had no more feeling for him than for ninety-nine others of her admirers, but as

he was rich, and might be useful some day to fall back upon if all other schemes failed, she condescended to reward his devotion now and then with small crumbs of encouragement, that made him think himself one of the luckiest men on earth.

‘How far are we from your place now, Mr. Courtenay?’ asked Helen, during the pause which succeeded to Miss Maynard’s denunciation of the sterner sex.

‘Only about five miles. I ordered dinner at six,—it is now a quarter past five; we have timed ourselves admirably.’

The house to which they were going was situated at Epsom, within easy distance of the course. It was here that Courtenay held high festival during the race week. It was a low square building, not very suitable for a permanent residence, but commodious enough for the purposes to which it was put. It wanted now about ten days to the Derby, and a staff of servants had been drafted to the place.

‘Have you anything in for the Derby this year?’ asked Helen presently.

‘No, I have been singularly unlucky with

Derbies, and have resolved to try no more. I put my trust in the Oaks this time; perhaps fortune, being feminine, may have some sympathy with me for once.'

'What are the latest odds against Joan, Granville?' cried Miss Maynard.

'Five to one; she has advanced two since Saturday. I have a notion that she is destined to land me a heap of money yet.'

'Have you much on?' questioned Helen.

'About ten thousand, laid at different times and various odds. My first bet on her was a thousand to fifteen. If she behaves as I hope she will, she will win me over seventy thousand.'

'You seem to grow enthusiastic when you speak of horses.'

'I think I do,' replied Courtenay with animation. 'I love the noble creatures. A race is to me the most exciting spectacle in the world, next I should think to a battle, which I have never seen. Of course you have witnessed a race?'

'Never,' answered Helen, with a little shiver; adding—'My feeling is very different from yours. It was through too great a love

of racing that papa lost his first fortune, before I was born.'

'Ah, that was unfortunate. No man ought to make himself a slave to any pleasure. I hope he has displayed no tendency to return to such disastrous pursuits?'

'I think he was cured by that one bitter lesson,' replied Helen.

In a few minutes they reached Fairoak, for so was the house called, and the party dismounted. There were two other ladies besides Helen and Blanche, and Mr. Vanstone and Colonel Maynard.

They strolled about the grounds, which were not in a very flourishing condition, for Courtenay hardly ever came to the place, save during the racing week.

'This would not be a bad place if the decorator and gardener were set to work for a few weeks,' he said to Helen, as they stood together looking at the house. 'It would make a capital retreat in the summer. I could drive over a party to dinner in the drag, and take them back in the cool evening. A good idea, eh, Miss Vanstone?'

Helen answered in the affirmative ; and Courtenay, in order to get her all to himself, took her round the grounds under the pretence of having her advice as to laying them out afresh. Being blessed with taste, she afforded him some valuable hints ; but it may safely be conjectured that he was more occupied in admiring the speaker than in gathering wisdom from her speech.

When she had suggested all that came into her mind, there was a rather embarrassing pause. She had detected, or fancied she detected in Courtenay's tones, a tenderness which alarmed her. She had already refused two offers without any opposition on the part of her mother, one from an impecunious baronet, the other from a rich contractor's son. She had no wish to be compelled to refuse a third from a man whom she had already begun to esteem as a friend. She knew that in their own circle their names had been coupled together for some little time by those whose business it is to pry into their neighbour's affairs ; and, to her great dismay, Courtenay's manner was growing more lover-like every time they met.

Not a word had been mentioned between Mrs. Vanstone and herself on the subject ; but Helen knew instinctively that this was the husband whom her mother had secretly designed for her. She had resolved that no power on earth should compel her to marry, while her heart was still filled with the old love ; but she dreaded encountering the storm which her refusal of so eligible an offer would bring.

‘Shall we rejoin the others ?’ she said, in a tone which showed her uneasiness at being left alone with him.

‘If you wish it,’ replied Courtenay, coldly, while a deep flush of mortification overspread his handsome face. He half-guessed the reason of her proposition, and felt that it was not flattering to his vanity. Skilled as he was in reading women, she was rather a riddle to him. Nothing could be kinder or more gracious than her manner before people ; but the moment they happened to find themselves alone, it changed to a kind of frightened shyness,—the shyness of a woman who is nervously dreading a proposal she cannot accept.

If she had liked him less, she would have been more easy; but she heartily disliked the prospect of being compelled to cause him pain, and to break off the pleasant relations of friendship which had been first established between them. They walked along in silence, till they were met by Blanche and her devoted captain.

‘Where have you two been hiding yourselves?’ asked the lively coquette, darting a penetrating glance at her cousin and his companion.

‘We have hidden ourselves nowhere, most inquisitive of women; we have only been making a tour of the grounds,’ replied Courtenay, resuming his usual unruffled demeanour, which had been momentarily disturbed by Helen’s wish to avoid a tête-à-tête.

They all returned to the house, Blanche and the captain following at some distance behind.

‘Does not that look rather like a case?’ whispered the captain.

‘I have seen him just as much taken with a dozen women I could name,’ replied Miss Maynard, carelessly, as she amused herself

by plucking at the petals of a flower her adorer had just presented to her.

‘Of course, you know him better than I do; but it seems to me as if he were terribly in earnest. Their names are coupled together at the clubs.’

‘Oh, well, we shall see,’ again replied the young lady, in an impatient tone, as if she were weary of the subject. ‘But Granville Courtenay is not an easy fish to land.’ By which elegant idiom, and the emphasis with which it was uttered, it may be inferred that Miss Maynard knew something of her cousin’s character.

They all sat down to a dinner which was perfect in its way, as it ought to have been, considering that it was the work of an artist to whom Courtenay gave a fine income. Conversation flowed brilliantly. Helen recovered her spirits when she saw she was out of danger, and contributed materially to the amusement of the party. And Courtenay, although in secret his thoughts would go back to that little scene in the grounds, exerted himself successfully to play the agreeable host.

‘ You ought to invite me down here for the race week, Granville,’ said Miss Blanche, during the progress of dinner.

Her cousin smiled.

‘ Fairoak is never graced with the presence of ladies during that feverish period. Our thoughts are with our jockeys and our betting-books, and we should prove most disagreeable companions. Our visitors would be disgusted with us after a few hours ; don’t you think so, uncle ?’ he asked, turning to Colonel Maynard.

‘ Yes, yes ; we don’t want them here then,’ replied the old soldier, heartily. He was old and weather-beaten, and had lost his feelings for the sex. Privately, he considered young women rather a bore : one had to flatter and compliment them, and these little attentions wearied him.

‘ I believe you wish there were no women in the world ; I am sure you wish there were no daughters,’ cried Blanche, laughing.

‘ I did not say so, my dear,’ replied her father, sipping his champagne with the gusto of a man who enjoys the pleasures of the table. But though he was too polite and

politic to avow it before others, his daughter had been a great care and trouble to him. He had been able to command men, and compel them to obey him ; but this resolute, daring girl he had never been able to control. The poor old man would have invoked the peculiar blessing of heaven on the man who would have taken his daughter off his hands.

‘Why the d—l don’t you take that young Seymour ? he has been following you for years like a little dog ;’ he had often said to her in an angry tone ; and Miss Blanche had frowned, and replied, with a temper equal to his own, that she would not be coerced into taking a husband ; that when she cared to marry, she would do so, not before.

The ladies retired, and the three gentlemen sipped their wine and discussed the topics of the day.

‘As fine claret as ever I tasted !’ exclaimed the old colonel, during a pause in the conversation.

‘I am glad you like it, for I have told Parkes to send you some ; it is a quality that one cannot often get,’ said his nephew.

‘It’s very kind of you, my dear boy,’ replied the uncle, warmly.

Presently their host left the room for a few moments, and then the colonel, turning to Mr. Vanstone, said, in his hearty tones,—

‘By Gad! sir, I love that boy as if he were my own son. He has got the largest heart in the world. By Jove! sir, I believe he would give his head away if it were loose.’

‘He is a most genial young man,’ assented Gabriel Vanstone.

‘A young man in a thousand, I might say in a hundred thousand, as far as good qualities are concerned,’ pursued the enthusiastic uncle. ‘It’s a pity he was not brought up in a better school.’

‘Was it a bad one?’ queried the other.

‘A very bad one, sir—a very bad one. Granville Courtenay’s father was a listless, cynical, extravagant man of fashion, with a very strong touch of the *roué* in him. The boy has not inherited one of his father’s vices, but he *has* got a few of his weaknesses. But what could you expect? My poor sister,—whom, by the way, Courtenay mar-

ried because she was an heiress,—died when the boy was about twelve. Had she lived, her influence would have made him a very different fellow.'

At this point his nephew returned, and the colonel filled his glass, to conceal a slight embarrassment at having been interrupted in his narrative by the entrance of the man it concerned.

'Any more wine, gentlemen? because we ought to start from here soon.' Then, as they would take no more wine, they went into the drawing-room to the ladies.

Helen was standing at a small table, admiring some knick-knacks scattered about on it. One that chiefly took her fancy was an exquisitely carved paper-knife.

'Do you admire that?' asked Courtenay, as she took it in her hand to examine it more closely.

'I think I have never seen anything more elegant.'

'Would you favour me by accepting it? it will be so much safer in your keeping,' he said, in a low tone.

She blushed slightly. 'But it may have

some valuable associations that render it precious in your eyes.'

'It has not; but if you take it, it will have,' he replied, with a look that lent unmistakable emphasis to the words.

The conversation upon this subject had not been conducted in such low tones as to escape the acute ears of Blanche Maynard.

'What a coquette she is!' she said to herself, ignoring the fact that, in the society of the three kingdoms, it would have been impossible to find a greater coquette than herself.

After that little episode, the drag was brought round, and they began their homeward journey. The heat of the day was gone; the sun was slowly sinking behind a range of hills that looked purple in his dying rays. The sweet, pure air blew in their faces, laden as it was with the balmy scents of evening, and the birds filled the air with melody.

And as Helen leaned back in her seat, listening to the tones of the man in whose voice and manner she detected the unmistakable tenderness of a lover, there rose before her

the vision of another, and a fairer night than this, when the voice of nature had spoken to her with a fuller and a sweeter meaning than it did now. And she knew that the words and the love of another could never fill her heart with the joy that was poured into it then.





CHAPTER XXX.

THE PLEASURES OF WEALTH.

THOUGH has been said to show that Helen persistently and bitterly mourned her lost lover ; but it would be false to assert that the novelty of the scenes amidst which she found herself a prominent figure, did not furnish some respite from grief by the distraction it caused. The world which she had so long desired to enter was now unfolded to her ken. Its aristocratic inhabitants, about whom she soon discovered that she had formed some very erroneous notions, were her daily companions. Their mode of life was now hers, and she fell into it with an ease that showed it was one eminently suited to her nature.

Lady Grahame's prejudices melted away by magic on closer acquaintance, until she became warmly attached to her young relative. 'I wish you were my daughter, dear,' she said to her one day, with a little sigh. Her married life had not been blessed with children, and she felt envious of Mrs. Vanstone.

'Ah, you would soon find me a great trouble. "'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view,'" replied Helen, smiling.

'You are a saucy girl. Do you know, Helen, I do not know how to resent enough your obstinacy in not making it up with me before. To think of the weary time you passed in that odious street, shut out from all refined and cultivated acquaintance.'

The girl blushed vividly. 'Dear Lady Grahame, I was a very wilful, proud creature. If you had said a word that indicated your readiness to take me into favour again, I should have only been too happy to take advantage of it. But I could not bear to seem to *beg* for forgiveness. So, you see, it was a case of mutual misunderstanding.'

'Agreed,' said Lady Grahame, pleasantly;

adding, 'And this life seems to suit you perfectly.'

'Oh, yes,' cried Helen, merrily. 'When I first entered it, I must own I was terribly frightened. I thought the sons and daughters of fashion were particularly starchy in their talk and manners. My experience of the nobility, for example, was taken from the stage, where, as you know, they are represented by intelligent dramatists in a manner totally unlike reality. I remember being particularly impressed with a marquis in a play called "The Victim of Love." He wore an eyeglass all the evening, and said little more than haw-haw. Now, tell me, Lady Grahame, have you ever, in the course of your experience, come across an English nobleman, or gentleman either, who said haw-haw ?'

'I don't think I have,' answered her ladyship, laughing.

'I have not, I know. I really believe I had got it into my head that lords and ladies were a totally distinct species of the human race. Was it not absurd? As if anybody could be more natural than Lord

Foppleton, or that nice girl Lady Mabel Neville !'

Helen soon caught the tone of this new world, but her mother was not so successful. When Mrs. Vanstone had fancied that she wanted to be a fine lady, she merely meant that she wanted to have plenty of money. She could never bring herself to master the small details of fashionable knowledge. Once she made poor Helen blush terribly, by asking innocently of Blanche Maynard if the Coldstreams were an infantry or a cavalry regiment. Another time she spoke of Lord Foppleton, the eldest son of the Earl of Barkshire, as a peer. It is to be feared that a few of the more cynical spirits among her new acquaintance made merry over these small mistakes, as reviewers grow mirthful over the errors of an author when he ventures to discuss subjects of which he knows little.

Helen tried to coach her mother in these small but important matters, but Mrs. Vanstone was too old to learn. She was willing enough to be taught; but for the life of her she could never remember whether the 10th

Hussars was a more 'crack' regiment than the —th Foot, or *vice versa*; who married such an one, etc., etc.

'It's enough to confuse anybody,' she would exclaim petulantly to her husband. 'Between ourselves, Gabriel, I detest this life. Helen knows all the ins and outs of the business as if she had moved in such society from her birth. If it were not for her sake, I should only be too glad to leave it altogether.'

Of course, the very great people did not come to their house (with the exception of Granville Courtenay, drawn thither by love), only the stars of fifth or sixth magnitude. It was in the drawing-rooms of Lady Grahame, or under her chaperonage, that Helen made acquaintance with the Foppletons, the Boretouns, the Lady This and the Lady That. And as a general principle, she was prepared to pronounce in favour of the world of fashion against the world of Bohemia, as it had been represented at Ralph's memorable party. The Bohemians were agreeable folk, well educated, with plenty of wit; but there was in their manners

a want of the polish and refinement which prevails in a world of wealth and luxury. Man against man, she preferred Foppleton to Sparkle, Boretoun to Bite. Sparkle had twenty times more brain than Foppleton ; but then Foppleton drove a stepper, while Sparkle rode in an omnibus,—Foppleton smoked cigars, while Sparkle puffed at pipes. Foppleton had Poole for his tailor, Sparkle got his coats from the Strand. Small differences these in the eyes of the philosopher, but omnipotent in the eyes of a young lady whose tastes and temperament lean to the side of luxury.

Only in one instance, when she came to compare the most finished gentleman of the world of fashion, Granville Courtenay, with the most finished gentleman of the world of Bohemia, Ralph Weldon,—only in this one instance did she find that it was the difference between tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee. Had Ralph entered any one of the saloons she now frequented, he would have held his own with the best in bearing, demeanour, and appearance. Could they both have been presented to her as utter strangers, and she

had been asked to point out which was the aristocrat and which the Bohemian, she would have been puzzled to choose. She must have said that they were both aristocrats. In their intercourse with women, there was in each that kind of chivalrous bearing so rare in men of the present day. In their intercourse with men, there was observable in each that kind of obvious superiority which implies a capacity for leadership. Then Helen, being a stickler for birth, remembered that, on one side at least, Ralph had good blood in his veins.

After a time, however, it began to strike her that the chief objection to this mode of life seemed to lie in the fact, that you lived too much for other people and too little for yourself. Pleasure, like everything else, palls with repetition. When you find every evening devoted to a party, a dance, a reception, or some other form of amusement, you begin to grow a little weary, unless a most hardened pleasure-seeker. Another thing she observed was that, in a wealthy society, it is easy to make heaps of acquaintance, but extremely difficult to make friends. The

fact is there is no time. You meet people for an hour or two, and are able to exchange five minutes' conversation with them. You nod to them next day in the park with a hundred others who must be nodded to. You meet them again for a minute or two in a drawing-room before dinner, come across them again a few hours afterwards amongst a crowd. In this manner you may come into contact with people for years, without knowing them a bit better at the end than at the beginning. Of course, there is one important exception to this rule,—a young man and a young woman can become closely acquainted in any society and under any conditions.

Of the many persons whom she could now reckon among her acquaintance, agreeable young men, agreeable and envious young women, Granville Courtenay and Blanche Maynard were the only two that she could really call friends, the only two who would have honestly lamented her departure from amongst them, and remembered it a year after. And yet, as we have said, Helen was a beauty and a star of the first magnitude.

But people who live in a continuous whirl of gaiety and excitement have little leisure to think over the past and mourn perished idols. The king is dead, long live the king, is the cry, as they hasten to live in the present.

To tell the truth, could she have had her own way, she would have preferred a kind of existence midway between the two extremes of Bohemianism and fashion. She would have liked to have plenty of money, of course, since without money there is no comfort; but in other respects she would have made an alteration. Instead of this ugly town-house, out of whose back-windows you gazed on a broken array of roofs and chimney-pots, and out of whose front ones you beheld a monotonous view of ugly mansions of the same size, form, and colour, she would have liked a picturesque dwelling, within driving distance of London, surrounded by beautiful gardens, smooth lawns, and beds of beautiful flowers. Instead of parties of hundreds, where one knew only a small percentage, she would have preferred smaller but more friendly gatherings, where every-

body knew everybody else, or would before the evening was ended. And she would have preferred that the festivities should be less frequent, in order that she might enjoy them better.

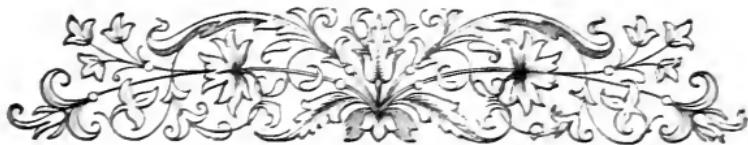
Even after so brief an acquaintance with fashionable life, there were many times on which, when dressing for a garden or dinner-party, or dance, she felt inclined to stay at home out of sheer weariness.

She began to fancy that a country life would suit her best, and suggested to her father to buy an estate. In the winter it would be agreeable to fill the house, not with fugitive guests, who swallowed a dinner and went off, but people whom one could get really to know. But neither Mr. Vanstone nor his wife regarded this proposition with great favour. The old gentleman felt he was not very well fitted for the duties and responsibilities of a landed proprietor; and Mrs. Vanstone knew that country families are much more starchy than London society, and would turn up their respectable noses at the daughter of a linendraper.

‘It’s a wise mouse that doesn’t venture

far out of its own nest,' said that penetrating woman. 'London society is a large ocean, in which our small craft can swim without much fear of being overhauled; country society is a little river, in which it would be despaired directly.'





CHAPTER XXXI.

A STRANGE MEETING.

IT is time that the story returned to Ralph Weldon. When he reached home on the evening of that fruitless interview with Helen, the despair written in his face told his sister all without need of words. She folded her arms round him, and said through her tears,—

‘ My poor, wronged Ralph! henceforth we must be all to each other.’

He responded to that loving appeal with a silent pressure of the hand, and sat silent for a long time, pursuing the train of his bitter fancies.

‘ Would it grieve you very much to leave this home, Clara?’ he asked at length.

It cost the girl a stronger effort than he guessed to answer 'No,' for her heart had become rooted to the home which her watchful and loving care had made so dear to him; but she knew that he could never shake off those mournful memories there.

'We will leave it as soon as you please, dearest Ralph.'

'You are a generous, noble-hearted girl,' he answered gently. 'I would not require from you this sacrifice, did I not know that it will be for our future happiness. She would haunt this place, day and night; I should hear her footfall on the stair, and see her shadow in every room. The very flowers that bloom here, the sunshine that falls upon them, speak to me perpetually of the fatal past. Fool that I was, not to heed the warning that came from my mother's dying lips;—the love which broke her heart and blighted her life has fulfilled its curse upon her son.'

So, in a fortnight's time, they had quitted Richmond for ever, and had fixed their home at Harrow, where Clara trusted that time would bring forgetfulness and healing

to the heart which had been wounded so sorely. Here, at least, there was nothing to speak or breathe of her vanished presence. The flowers that would grow here would not be those over whose bloom and fragrance she had lingered by his side ; the skies on which he gazed here, were not those in whose clear depths he had read bright omens of the future ; and there was no sparkling, shifting river, with its ever-moving current, to recall to him those fatal hours in which, under the soft shadows of descending night, they had poured out to each other the rapture of their hearts.

Years afterwards, when Ralph recalled the sensations of that wretched time, he wondered to himself how he could have lived through it, how the spirit could still carry on its broken existence under the dull, heavy weight beneath which it seemed to lie crushed. For day followed day, without a rent in the gloomy clouds, through which the longing eye could detect one transient ray of sunshine. The world was dead to him, and he walked in it with the air and tread of a man whose life no longer

beats in unison with the universal life around him. The day offered him no joy ; the night denied him repose. His heart was filled with but one restless longing, to hear her voice again, to look upon her face once more ; and he knew that even were that longing gratified, his misery would only be made even more intense that it was.

He had been so lavish with his love, he had opened his heart so readily and unsuspicuously to these new and exquisite emotions, because he had believed so firmly in her faith. Beneath the wilfulness, and discontent, and disdain, born of her dissatisfaction with her sordid life, he had thought there lay a deep and noble nature. Not until she made to him that passionate avowal of the return of the old shadows, which, for a time, love had driven away, had he dared to harbour a doubt. And even with that confession rankling sorely in his memory, he had tried to frame excuses for her, he had tried to whisper hope to himself.

And now his faith lay shattered with his hopes. Eagerly as he hungered for a sight of the fair face,—frankly as he would have

forgiven the past had she come back to his arms,—he knew that the old Helen in whom he had trusted was and must be dead to him for ever. Those eyes, even should they rest upon him to-morrow, and fill his heart with its old tumultuous joy, could never shine now with the pure light that comes from an uncorrupted soul; those lips, on which he had laid his own with such perfect trust, must ever afterwards have in their kisses the taint of Judas. He would sooner have gazed upon her in her coffin,—knowing that her faith had been as pure as the spotless robe in which she was shrouded,—knowing that his memories of her would be unstained by one disgracing thought,—than that she should live to be such as this,—a woman whose treason to himself and to her own nobler nature was none the less black because it was suggested by a parent's threats and hallowed by a parent's approbation.

Such was the stern language he held to himself. He could not understand this sacrifice of love to filial obedience. She who sacrifices herself on such an altar is a willing victim, he said, in the anger of his heart.

But though he tried to teach himself to hate her, his efforts were useless. He loved her as passionately as ever, and would have given twenty years of his life to bring back the old dream.

And as if in ironical contrast to this secret misery, Fate brought him the success for which he had so long prayed. The picture on which he had lavished all the strength of his genius was lauded up to the skies. All the critics and artistic connoisseurs agreed that the man who could paint 'Maria Theresa' was already enrolled among the foremost artists. Noble patrons visited his studio, and politely intimated their regret at not having heard of him before. The people who hunt after celebrities implored him to show himself in their drawing-rooms,—to come forth and suffer himself to be admired.

And Ralph Weldon refused their invitations with savage persistence. What did he care for the compliments of those fools, who could only appreciate merit when somebody else pointed it out to them? He grew to entertain a morbid hatred of fashionable people, for were they not of the class which

had stolen from him his darling? He shut himself up in his studio, and painted away with ferocious energy, striving to drown thought by hard work.

His success had come too late to bring him perfect joy. It would be absurd to maintain that the public recognition of his genius—this public crowning of his aspirations—did not afford him some measure of reasonable gratification. But his heart was dead—the dearest hope of his life was dead, and the darkness of his soul was complete. They might proclaim his name with trumpet tongues to the four corners of the land; but she, whose pride in his fame ought to have been greater than his own, was away from his side. Dealers and patrons might load him with gold; but she, for whom this treasure could have purchased the luxuries on which she set her heart, had sold herself elsewhere.

At his club, Ralph heard a great deal about the doings of Gabriel Vanstone and his family. He had quitted it as soon as he came into possession of his uncle's money; and was now, through the introduction of Sir

Francis Grahame, a member of establishments of superior social standing. It was only natural, however, that his subsequent proceedings should form the theme of considerable gossip among men in whose genial society he had been accustomed to spend his evenings for so many years. From these industrious collectors of information, Ralph learned many details of their new life—the balls they attended, the parties they gave ; and one day, he heard the worst news of all,—that she was engaged to Granville Courtenay.

A kind of stony despair had succeeded to his first passionate grief, and he had gone on plodding, day after day, in his dull studio, with the air of a man for whom life had ceased to have any interest. But no sooner had he received that bitter intelligence than his old frenzy returned.

He had three sitters coming to him the next day,—a talkative lady, a red-faced alderman, and a member of Parliament. How he got through his work, how he managed to select the right colour, to return correct answers to the questions put to him, he never knew. His mind, his heart, and his

eyes were far away from the spot to which his body was chained, and the same instinct that guides the sleep-walker safely amid dangers that would exercise all the faculties of a conscious person, must have been at work within him ; and enabled him, from the force of habit, to do all that had to be done.

But when the day with its hateful routine was left behind, and he felt himself a free man, as far as his actions were concerned, the thought of passing the evening in his own unsmiling home was torture to him. He rushed out of the house, and walked on and on for miles, he knew not whither, he cared not whither, so long as it was in a direction different from that which led to the house where a hundred trivial associations reminded him of his blasted hopes. It was dusk when he halted at a small inn on the Kensall road for refreshment. He felt faint and exhausted with emotion and fatigue, and while they were preparing the simple meal he had ordered, he buried his head in his hands, and, strong man as he was, wept as he had never done since the days of his childhood.

And then, when he turned back again, there came upon him a burning, an uncontrollable desire to look upon her once more, to be content with even a glimpse of her shadow on the blind. He struck rapidly in the direction of South Kensington, and, after an hour's hard walking, stood motionless opposite Gabriel Vanstone's house. A carriage was waiting at the door. He said to himself that it must be there for the purpose of conveying them to some haunt of pleasure, and his heart beat with a violence that almost suffocated him, as he saw that there was every chance of his longing being gratified.

He crossed the street to get a better view of her when she should come out, and stood a few yards in the rear of the carriage. A passing policeman turned round and looked at him with suspicious curiosity, for his eyes were lit with a feverish fire, and his face was as pale as that of the dead.

Presently the door opened, and two figures advanced—they were those of Mr. Vanstone and his wife,—and a heavy curse stole from his white lips as he recognised the authors of his misery. Another moment of painful sus-

pense, and behind them there came a form which made every nerve and pulse thrill. It was Helen, and she was leaning on the arm of the man whom rumour assigned her for a husband.

A hansom cab was passing at a walking-pace: Ralph jumped into it, and directed the driver to follow the carriage. Now that he had seen her, he felt that he must pursue her as far as he could. The carriage drew up at the doors of the Haymarket Theatre; they alighted and went in. After a moment's delay, he did the same, taking a ticket for the dress circle, as being the most convenient place for observation. He was shown to a seat, fee'd the attendant, received a programme, and set himself to watch. Yes! there they were, close to him in that box on the right. He was unseen for the present; so much the better! And there by her side was the man whom she had put in his place. How proud he seemed of his beautiful prize, how eagerly he turned to her as she spoke, how assiduous in his attentions. And Helen talked and smiled as brightly as if she had never known a care in the world. Oh, it was easy to see

that the past had left no shadow on her life! The curtain drew up, the play began, the party in the box riveted their eyes upon the performers. Ralph Weldon saw neither the stage nor the actors; his burning gaze was fixed upon her and the man whom at that moment he could have slain without remorse.

The act was ended. Helen turned quickly round, and for the first time met those eyes that seemed to glow like coals of fire. She turned deadly pale, and with great difficulty suppressed a cry. Courtenay, who was talking to Mr. Vanstone, did not observe her sudden emotion, but her mother did, and looking round for the cause, found herself confronted by the same ardent gaze that had so affected Helen. She turned swiftly to the girl, and whispered,—

‘For heaven’s sake, command yourself, my child.’

Through her pale and trembling lips came with difficulty the answer,—

‘You do not know what an effort it costs me. Let us get away from this place.’

Courtenay, attracted by this whispering, turned round and saw how pale she was.

‘ My dear Miss Vanstone, what is the matter ? are you ill ? ’

‘ I am—ill : let us leave,’ she said, as she leaned back, half fainting, in her chair.

‘ I will see about it immediately,’ said Courtenay, rising hurriedly. In a few moments he returned, and they all rose to leave.

Ralph had never taken his glance off them ; and when they quitted their box, he left his seat too, and hastening down-stairs, planted himself in the small hall through which they must pass.

She came, leaning on the arm of Granville Courtenay, pale as death, and with her eyes cast down ; for she had seen him there as they entered, and dared not meet his gaze. The parents followed ; and as they passed close to him, Mrs. Vanstone said, in a low voice,—

‘ Is this a manly revenge ? ’

Ralph’s only answer was a bitter smile. He followed them through the door, and then strode rapidly in the direction of his own home. His temples throbbed, it seemed to him as if his heart and brain were on fire.



CHAPTER XXXIII.

FRIENDS, NOT LOVERS.

WE know that the rumour which had driven Ralph Weldon to despair, and led him once more into the presence of his late betrothed, was false. But there is never smoke without fire, and Courtenay's intimates were quite certain that if he had not already proposed, he would very shortly do so. In this surmise they were quite correct. A long time now had elapsed from the moment that he had first owned to himself his happiness could only be assured by Helen consenting to become his wife. He was as deeply in love as a man can be: why, then, it might be asked, had he delayed so long in putting a simple question? For no other

reason than this, that he felt uncertain about the answer. Helen had invariably treated him with courtesy and kindness, and had displayed towards him a kind of frank regard. Now, Granville Courtenay was skilled in the ways of women ; and it seemed to him that her treatment of him, flattering as it might appear to outsiders, was just the treatment never employed by a young girl in love. Her manner was so very equable, while love, it is well known, has hot and cold fits. If she did care for him, it was more likely that her affection resembled that of a sister rather than the passionate devotion of a woman who would be glad to become a wife.

It was thus that Courtenay reasoned with himself on the unfavourable side ; but that hope, which is never entirely absent from a lover's heart, whispered arguments of a more cheerful nature. Helen was not quite like other worldly girls : she was rather purer, rather more careful of her self-respect than most. Was it not possible that what he mistook for indifference, was nothing but a protective armour assumed by maidenly

pride and modesty? There are plenty of women in the world, although he did not at the moment remember having met them, who make cold lovers and passionate wives, who refuse to let a man see into their heart until he has made it his own. Then he took a commercial view of the matter—he was a most eligible *parti*. Helen, it is true, was both a beauty and an heiress ; but even a beauty and an heiress would not do badly in marrying a man who was the next heir to a barony, and possessed a rent-roll of over thirty thousand a-year. Mrs. Vanstone made no secret of her preference for him. She would, at any rate, be glad enough to secure him for a son-in-law, and what pleased her in such a matter, would please Mr. Vanstone also. Altogether, looking at it from many points of view, it did not seem likely that she would refuse him. Of most other young ladies brought up in the world, and possessed of a fair share of the world's philosophy, he would have said possible instead of likely.

One thing was very certain, this state of suspense was growing very hard to bear.

Better know the worst at once, he said to himself resolutely, although he felt his heart sink a little at the prospect such words conjured up. So, one day, he screwed up his courage to the sticking point, and set out for South Kensington. He would propose without any unnecessary delay, and abide the result like a man. He would have preferred to have had a more satisfactory indication of her sentiments towards him, but he could wait no longer. Patience was not one of his virtues ; up to the present he had got everything he wished for only too easily.

He found Mrs. Vanstone alone in the drawing-room, and wishing to secure her at once for an ally, unfolded his errand. This worthy woman found it a hard task to conceal her exultation, but she did succeed in preventing herself from displaying it too openly, and after a few words, rose to send Helen to him, and also to prepare her for the good fortune which was within grasp. Fate was not on the maternal side that day, for, just as she got near the door, Helen entered. Oh that this meeting could have taken place outside instead of inside, was

Mrs. Vanstone's fervent prayer. As it was, she accosted her daughter in a voice of honey, and darted at her most expressive looks.

‘I was just coming to look for you, my dear. I must ask you to entertain Mr Courtenay for a few moments.’ She glided from the room with a face that spoke volumes, and left the young people alone.

Then, after a few moments of talk upon other topics, Granville Courtenay unfolded his mission. At first, he spoke in tones that were somewhat hesitating; but, as he proceeded to speak of his love for her, and how necessary it was to his life that she should become his, his voice grew assured, his language fervent. When he had finished, the tears stood in Helen’s eyes.

‘May I venture to hope, Miss Vanstone?’ he asked, after an interval of silence, which had been employed by her in thinking how she could best soften the blow. Then in a few kind and gentle, but firm words, she told him that this could never be.

He turned very pale at this answer. His love was disappointed and his pride wounded

—the two bitter pills that a rejected man has to swallow. After a time, Helen added,—

‘I know no one whose character I esteem more highly. In my whole life I have never met with anyone whom I would more willingly retain as a life-long friend; but these are not the sentiments that would justify me in accepting your offer. I should be wronging you more deeply than myself.’

‘In time you might learn to care for me,’ he urged, almost humbly. After all, his love was the greater sufferer from her refusal.

‘I fear not,’ she answered, with a quiet sadness, as her thoughts flew back to Ralph Weldon’s wooing, and the unstained rapture of that summer night among the roses. She paused a moment; then added, with a frankness few girls would have imitated, ‘To speak the truth, Mr. Courtenay, I have no heart left to give. You have heard, of course, that we have not always lived in this world; that we owe our ability to mix in it to the caprice of a rich relative. You are a gentleman; you have done me the highest honour a man can confer upon a woman, and I have no hesitation in entrusting you with

my secret. I acquired wealth at the cost of happiness. I live in the present, but my heart lives in the past. It is most unlikely that I shall ever marry, unless I can learn to forget better than I have done.'

There was a pathos in the simple words which no pen can describe, and he saw her lip quiver with anguish as she uttered them. He was a gentleman to the core, and he felt that to press his suit at such a moment would be ungenerous. 'Your secret shall be safe with me: I pledge my honour for it,' he said, as he bade her farewell. Then he added, with a sudden passion that half startled her, 'I would give ten years of my life to have inspired such feelings as that more fortunate lover.'

She smiled half bitterly to herself, as she thought that Ralph Weldon would have given ten years of his life never to have loved her. 'You will still be my friend?' she asked, sweetly.

'Do you really wish it?' answered Courtenay, his lip curling with a petulance he did not really feel.

'I do, from the bottom of my heart,' she

said, earnestly, and without blushing, for she knew she spoke in all innocence.

'I will continue your friend then, although I run a great risk.' Then, trying to hide his disappointment as well as he could, he left her.

He walked back to his home very slowly, and full of thought. In the first place, he had suffered a decided humiliation. He had done his best to hide his preference for Helen, to smile down the banter of his intimates upon the subject: but, unfortunately, in these matters one's acquaintance are horribly sharp-sighted, and cannot be deceived. Now, of course, he would have to shun her society to some extent, and the reason of that would soon be guessed at. Good taste might keep his friends silent, but it would be a frequent theme among themselves. There were plenty, too, who envied him his good looks, his high position in society: and they would sneer pretty openly at this take-down of Courtenay's pride. He too, above all men, who had won so great a prize in the matrimonial lottery, to draw such a blank as this.

For although the world, properly so called, knew nothing about him, although readers of newspapers had never seen his name except among the list of guests at some duke's house in the hunting or shooting season, yet in his own world he was a big man. His physical gifts,—his unobtrusive but sterling talents, supported by his wealth and the memory of one most fortunate alliance,—gave him the *entrée* into fastidious saloons, which would not have opened their doors to many men nominally his superiors. The highest society is democratic in tone, and in its midst Granville Courtenay was a greater man than many a nobleman. The *jeunesse dorée* of his day adored him, proclaimed him the best dressed man of his time, and chose their clothes as he bade them. Young bumpkins fresh from public schools and universities pointed him out to each other as a leader of the world they had just entered. Ladies petted him; there was a duke's daughter who would accept him to-morrow if he asked her, and several other young ladies not so high in the social scale who would be glad enough to become Mrs. Cour-

tenay and a peeress *in futuro*. A reputation of this kind is ephemeral, and except in a few rare cases, does not penetrate to the outer world or come to posterity,—but it gains the fortunate owner a vast consideration for the time.

And in the second place, he was bitterly disappointed. Of all the women he had ever met, including his own former wife, this was the only one who had awakened in him an ardent and passionate love. The vision of life with her had seemed a brighter one than he had ever imagined in his wildest dreams: and now this was not to be. Altogether, Granville Courtenay, the popular, the spoiled, the favourite of one sex, the pet of the other, was as sad a man as could be found in England: as sad perhaps in his way as that other faithful lover, out of whose life the light had gone, perhaps for ever.

Hardly had the door closed on the disappointed wooer when Mrs. Vanstone, who had been lurking in convenient proximity, burst into the drawing-room, exultation on her visage, joy sparkling in her eye. 'Well, Helen, darling, is it all settled?'

‘I have told Mr. Courtenay that I do not care enough for him to become his wife,’ answered the girl, as firmly as she could.

At this hardy announcement, Mrs. Vanstone fairly lost her temper, forgot that she was playing the fashionable lady, and raved and stormed like a very common person.

‘You are a fool, an ungrateful, obstinate fool!’ she shrieked in her wrath. ‘I have worked my hardest to get you well placed in life,—gone to places that I hate, sat till the small hours of the morning among people who despise me and whom I detest; and now when the fruit is ripe and ready to be plucked, you won’t put out your hand to gather it. I shall go mad! I shall go mad!’

‘Have a little patience, mamma. I am in no mood to think of marriage now. It seems but yesterday that I was a happy girl, happy in *his* love, drawing pictures of my life with *him*, listening to *his*—’ She did not finish the sentence, for a sob came instead of words and choked her.

‘Now, was there ever anything in the world so idiotic,—moaning and groaning over the past?’ cried Mrs. Vanstone, fiercely.

To people who are destitute of sentiment themselves, it seems so unreasonable in others to be troubled by any. 'It's high time you forget that man, and it is only your obstinacy that prevents you. I say your conduct is unnatural ; and to prove it is, just look at other girls. Here's Lucy Singleton married yesterday to Lord Mumble, old, ugly, and decrepit. Now, if I had wished you to tie yourself to an old fossil like that, I might have been thought harsh and tyrannical ; but the husband I chose for you is one of the handsomest men of his day,—dozens of girls would only be too glad to get him,—and you refuse him because you are still hankering after that artist fellow. You will break my heart with your folly and obstinacy.' And thereupon Mrs. Vanstone threw herself into a chair, and wept tears of bitter wrath.

Not very many months ago, such a sight as this would have moved Helen to fall on her knees, throw her arms round her mother's neck, and promise to do her bidding. But for some time now there had been gradually dawning the conviction that this mother,

whom she had so idolized, was not the immaculate being she fancied. The coarseness of her whole speech, especially her most coarse reference to a man who had reaped such misery at her hands, froze in the girl's bosom any sympathy that might have arisen for a mother's disappointed ambition. There was a concentrated bitterness in her tones as she said slowly, 'Have you cared over-much about breaking my heart?'

Mrs. Vanstone raised her head, and looked at her daughter with some surprise. Instinct led her to detect in it the expression of a bitter and mutinous feeling which had never appeared before. She was, however, too wary to make any answer; so Helen continued,—

'When, at your bidding, I renounced all hope of happiness, it was agreed between us that the word marriage was not to be mentioned for many, many years.'

At this point, Mrs. Vanstone, feeling herself upon safer ground, burst out with—

'Don't talk rubbish. If a mother made that promise in a moment of weakness, she would never think of keeping it. The one mission of mothers is to get their daughters married.'

‘This only proves that our natures are very different,’ said Helen, quietly; then, perceiving that Mrs. Vanstone was about to resume the attack, she added, with a passion for which the other was totally unprepared,—
‘Mamma, it is useless for you to add another word! Neither entreaties nor commands shall force me to give my hand to one man, while my heart, my love, my thoughts belong to another! It may be that in time I shall grow to forget that sweet dream of my life; but until then, do not ask me,—do not ask me to suffer another’s words of—’

She ceased, overpowered by the rush of her own emotions; and before her storm of grief her mother’s fitful wailings died away, as all petty sorrow must in the presence of an overpowering anguish.

‘Hush, hush, Helen! I am your mother still. I love you, my own darling, better than life! Lean your head upon me, and I will comfort you.’

She loved her dearly enough, in her own fashion, it is true: let us hope it is not a fashion universal amongst mothers.



CHAPTER XXXIII.

‘ONCE AGAIN.’

HELEN'S reputation increased with time. Her portrait in the Academy attracted universal attention, and made her name familiar to others besides her own small world. The undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge discussed her merits at their wines ; and any gentleman who had had the good fortune to be present at an assemblage graced by her, even although he had only formed one of an undistinguished crowd by the door, was accounted a blessed man. Young lads from Eton and Harrow, up in London for their ‘*exeat*,’ gazed on her with reverent admiration, and took back a glowing account of her charms to their companions. The Harrov-

ians especially took almost a personal interest in her, for the rumour had reached them that she was going to marry their Olympian Jupiter, Granville Courtenay. Let nobody deny that Beauty is as great a power in the nineteenth century as ever it was in the days of chivalry, or that more remote period when the Greek nations beleaguered the walls of Ilion.

As for poor Courtenay, to whom rumour had been so flatteringly false, for a time he entertained serious thoughts of drowning his disappointment in ambition. A snug little borough was shortly expected to fall vacant, through the retirement from ill-health of the sitting member. He turned his attention to it, and even went so far as to consult some of his friends, and make some notes for an address. The excitement of political life would be a good antidote to melancholy. But ambition of the public kind had never had great charms for him, and his zeal soon died out. He spent three or four evenings in the gallery of the House of Commons, and came to the conclusion that on the whole it was dull work. The place looked lively

enough when Gladstone or Disraeli addressed overflowing benches in a great debate, but this was only its occasional aspect. He had not faith enough in his own powers to think a time might come when princes, and princesses, and ambassadors would leave their usual occupations to listen to his eloquence. He could not conceive how it was possible that a man could take delight in speaking to a dozen gentlemen and the reporters, as nine-tenths of the members do.

So he renounced the idea of a political career, and learned to bear his sorrow as best he could. Helen had begged that their friendship might not be broken off; and after a little interval, in which he nursed his wounded pride, he resumed his visits at her house. She welcomed him back in her most gracious manner; and so much was he impressed with it, that a new hope flashed into his heart. It might be possible to win her yet. Time works wonders, and time might cure her of her old love, and teach her to find happiness in that he offered her.

One day, he called to invite her to go down to the Harrow Speech-day.

'A friend of mine, a young master, who has not yet got a house, that is to say, does not take boarders, has asked me to lunch with him,' he explained to her. 'He has told me I may bring as many friends as I like. So, I thought the Grahames and you and I would form a nice little party ; just enough for a carriage. The Grahames have accepted ; will you come ?'

Helen accepted his offer with alacrity. The fact of his making it showed that he was prepared to forgive her cruel treatment of him.

'Oh, I shall be delighted to see the school. I have heard from your cousin that you were a great man there.'

He gave a little sigh.

'Ah ! Miss Vanstone, it is easy to succeed in small things,' he said, with a meaning look.

She felt rather uncomfortable, and turned off the remark in a light manner.

'You don't mean to tell me the admiration of your school-fellows was a small thing ! Some author has said that he knows no more enviable lot than that of the hero of a public school.'

But Courtenay was not to be put off.

‘I wish I could have been as successful in my other ambitions,’ he answered.

She held her finger up at him with an affectation of playfulness.

‘Now, Mr. Courtenay, you are not acting generously. You have responded to my invitation to be friends; and, I tell you frankly, I am very glad of it. But you must not deal in these little inuendos, because they would soon make our relations embarrassing; and, perhaps in time, render even friendship impossible.’

‘You are very hard,’ said poor Courtenay, resignedly; ‘but I suppose I have no choice but to obey.’

‘Of course you must, or I will not give you the pleasure of my company to-morrow.’

She spoke still in the same playful tone; but at the same time she felt heartily sorry for him. Had she never known Ralph Weldon, she could have found true happiness as his wife; and even now she had for him a feeling almost stronger than mere friendship,—almost that kind of sisterly affection which women often entertain for men who love

them, and whom they just fall short of loving.

So, a few days after, they drove down to Harrow in Lady Grahame's carriage. Helen looked forward to the excursion with pleasure, and when they alighted at the entrance of the little, old-fashioned High Street, a very lively scene presented itself to her view. The pathways and the road were crowded with groups of gaily-dressed people, the friends and relatives of the boys.

‘Why, it is as gay as a flower-show,’ exclaimed Helen. ‘And how smartly the boys are dressed, with their white waistcoats and lavender gloves. If they were just a little taller and older-looking, I should think they were exquisites taking a stroll down Piccadilly. I must own I am surprised; I always thought schoolboys were an untidy, slovenly set.’

‘There are schoolboys and schoolboys,’ answered Courtenay, smiling. ‘The typical Harrovian is a young man of fashion, I can assure you; is very particular about the cut of his clothes, and the shape of his hat. Of course, to-day, he is dressed in his best, and

has assumed the unwonted luxury of gloves : but on week-days, when there are no visitors, he is a neat and respectable-looking person-age. As an old Harrovian, legitimately proud of his school, I must beg to impress upon you that we have nothing in common with the members of establishments like Mr. Squeers.'

Helen laughed, and blushed a little too. She felt that she had exposed her ignorance in not knowing a little more of the habits of fashionable schools. They stopped before a small house, built in the Gothic style.

' My friend, C——, lives here ; we will go in and pay our respects to him,' said Courtenay, pushing open the gate. The street door was open, and Mr. C—— was just coming out as they entered. Introductions took place.

' I am afraid I cannot let you have more than two tickets for the speeches. The fine day has brought down the mothers and fathers in crowds. The ladies must have these, and you, Courtenay, with Sir Francis, must amuse yourself till lunch time,' said Mr. C——.

“ So it was arranged that Lady Grahame and Helen should go in to hear the speeches, under the escort of the master, while the gentlemen killed time as best they could.

When all the visitors were shut up in the great room called ‘Speecher,’ from the fact of the speeches taking place there, Courtenay and Sir Francis, who was also an old Harrovian, invited some half-a-dozen members of the School Cricket Eleven, known to them both, to the ‘King’s Head,’ the sole hotel of the place. Genial, stalwart young fellows were these heroes of the bat, and very kindly did they take to the beverages that their hosts provided for them. It was amusing to see the respect that they paid to Courtenay, as one of the greatest men that Harrow had ever produced in the cricketing and athletic departments. They looked upon Sir Francis as nobody by the side of him. And yet they were great men too, in their way, these youths. M—, with his murderous, twisting ‘slows,’ that had puzzled some of the best players in England; H—, the ‘hero unsurpassed of one gigantic score;’ C—, floored, alas ! very easily by a

tough line in Homer, but a tower of strength when he once 'got his eye in ;' S——, not so great a scorer as some, but whose 'form' was a liberal education to watch. But a truce to this description, which can have no interest, except to old Harrovians, and perhaps some of their fair sisters, whose sweet cheeks have paled with despair, or flushed with hope, while the rival schools were doing their best at 'Lords,' to the steady shouts of, 'Well played, Harrow !' 'Well bowled, Eton !'

'By Jove, the speeches must be over,' cried Courtenay, who, as great a boy as any of them where cricket was in question, had been discussing the chances of the approaching match. They all hurried to the door, and saw that it was so. The street was filled with groups passing on to lunch at the houses of the different masters. Mr. C——'s house being near the school, Helen and Lady Grahame had arrived there some time ago, under the guidance of their host.

'We shall catch it for not being at the school steps to receive them,' said Sir Francis, laughing. He and Courtenay bade

adieu to their friends, and hurried on to join the ladies.

Meanwhile, as it has been stated, Helen and her relative were waiting in Mr. C——'s dining-room.

'I have only four other guests to come,' he told them; 'my brother and two sisters, and a gentleman who lives here,—a man who has made some little stir in the artistic world. I have no doubt you have heard of him, his name is—'

Just as he was about to utter the name, the noise of the opening gate caused them all to look in the same direction.

'Talk of a person, and he is sure to appear,' said the master, laughing.

In another moment, the firm tread of the visitor was heard in the hall, and Helen turned deadly pale as her gaze met, for the second time in a few weeks, that of Ralph Weldon!





CHAPTER XXXIV.

A BRIEF INTERVIEW.

MR C—— advanced and greeted the young artist in a cordial voice,— ‘Weldon, let me present you to these two ladies, to whom you are no doubt already known by name.’

Lady Grahame, who had recognised him immediately, bowed courteously but coldly. Helen recovered herself sufficiently to say,— ‘Mr. Weldon and I are already old acquaintances.’

Ralph, on his part, was hardly less unnerved than herself; but, being a man, he recovered sooner, and bowing low over the hand she extended, the better to conceal his embarrassment, muttered some commonplace form of salutation.

Hardly had he done so, when Courtenay and Sir Francis entered in great haste.

‘Pray forgive us, dear ladies,’ cried Sir Francis, in a contrite tone. ‘This great boy Courtenay got involved in a long discussion as to the merits of slow bowling, and if an earthquake had happened, I don’t believe he would have felt it.’

The young master presented Weldon to the two gentlemen. Sir Francis, who was neither a suave nor an enthusiastic man, merely bowed; but Courtenay, who was courtesy itself, hastened to compliment him upon the picture which he had seen in that year’s exhibition.

Weldon was forced to acknowledge the compliment, but he did so in a manner that made the other think him an ungracious fellow. Little did he know of the mysterious and unconscious relations that existed between them. The other guests arrived while they were still chatting on indifferent subjects, and they then sat down to lunch. Helen found herself seated between Ralph and Sir Francis.

‘How did you like the speeches?’ asked

Ralph at length. To those who heard it, it seemed a most natural question, but to her and to him, it seemed a strange one to pass between two lovers who had last parted amidst such a different scene. To both, their presence here in a strange house, with a strange host, seemed like a dream. He could hardly realize that this beautiful, elegantly-dressed woman, was the same girl who had wept upon his breast on the night of that memorable interview in the garden.

She answered in the rapid, half-mocking tone which was assumed to veil the emotion that almost stifled her.

‘If I must speak the truth, not very much. The only things I understood were the prize poem and the scene from “*Les Plaideurs*.” The Greek and Latin were of course as perfectly unintelligible to me as to the rest of my sex.’

‘I would venture to wager that they were unintelligible to a large proportion of the other sex too,’ remarked Courtenay, from the other side of the table.

‘But they applauded very vigorously.’

‘Oh, that is easily done,’ said Ralph, who

was not to be outdone by the fluent man of fashion. ‘One man who remembers better than the others gives the signal, and the rest follow. It’s like the old woman who knew when it was the right time to cry in the parish sermon.’

Lady Grahame watched the young people with some uneasiness. From what little Mr. Vanstone had told her, she had gathered that their rupture had caused Helen a severe heartache ; and she felt very sorry that they had met in this unexpected manner. She wanted her to marry her favourite Courtenay, of whose rejection she had not the faintest suspicion.

Luncheon was over ; the guests rose, and Ralph, who had been talking about flowers with Helen, said, in as careless a tone as he could assume,—

‘Let me show you that wonderful orange-tree of Mr. C——’s ; it is only about half a second’s walk.’

With a burning blush, Helen murmured that she would like to see it, and they passed out into the garden.

Lady Grahame would have followed, but

at that moment one of the other ladies engaged her in conversation, and to leave was impossible.

Mr. C——'s garden was a large one, and after they had advanced a few steps, Ralph turned to the left, and took her down a gravel-walk into a portion that was not visible from the house. He halted opposite the tree which they had come ostensibly to observe, and for the first time since they had been freed from observation their glances met.

His was stern and sad, hers tremulous and tearful. They gazed at each other in this mute fashion for some little time. She first broke the silence.

'How strange that we should meet here,' she said at length, in a faltering tone.

'Strange, and you may add, how unfortunate,' was the rejoinder.

She was silent; and, after another pause, he added,—

'Do you not think so?'

'Perhaps,' she murmured, in an almost inaudible voice.

'Unfortunate, at least for me, Helen!'

Why did I leave that other home I loved so well except for you?—to shun, if possible, the memories that thrust themselves upon me there. Here, amid new scenes, new faces, I trusted I might in time learn to forget the past. Vain, vain hope! This meeting with you to-day will render this home as void of peace as was the other.'

For a moment he ceased; and then, seizing her hand, and impressing upon it a passionate kiss, he cried, in an accent of indescribable anguish,—

‘Oh, my darling, how you have made me suffer! ’

Her bosom heaved convulsively with the effort to suppress a sob, as she murmured beneath her breath,—

‘ My poor, poor Ralph! ’

‘ How readily does that expression of womanly compassion come to your lips, and how plainly does every act of your life contradict it! ’ he said bitterly. ‘ Did I not gaze on you the other night in the society of that aimless, fortunate drone of fashion? Every smile you gave him, every word you spoke to him, was like a fresh stab to my

bleeding heart! I see you here to-day with him. Oh, I grant he is a lover of whom a girl may well be proud,—rich, handsome, well-born, skilled in the hereditary art of fascinating women! What am I in comparison with him?—an uncouth, graceless Bohemian, without even a right to the name he bears!'

'Hush, hush, Ralph! You were, and ever will be, superior to all men in my eyes!'

'And you can say this to me when that man is about to become your husband?'

'It is false, false! Granville Courtenay can never be to me anything more than a friend. Ralph, we have hardly a moment together. Hear me speak, and I take heaven to witness, I will speak nothing but the truth. A cruel fate has divided our lives, but you will ever be dear to me. I can smile at the curse you invoked upon me that night, for it will never be fulfilled. So long as this heart beats, so long will it hold but one image,—your own. So long as it holds but one image, no other man shall ever boast that he is more blessed than you.'

‘Then, why persist in this cruel resolution? If you love me still—’ Emotion prevented him from finishing the sentence. He again seized her hand, and was about to draw her to him, when the sound of voices rose close to them.

‘Let me go, they are coming,’ she whispered, faintly. ‘I love you, my poor, wronged Ralph—I love you with all my heart; but we can never, never be—more than we are to each other now.’

He drew back, and hardly had he done so when the whole of the other guests burst upon them.

‘We have all come to look at this wonderful tree!’ cried a cheerful voice, that of Mr. C——’s sister. And Ralph, veiling his emotion as best he could, talked about trees and flowers for the rest of the visit, like a man in a dream. Half an hour afterwards, Lady Grahame’s carriage was conveying Helen back to London.

Late that night, when the girl was alone in her own room, she drew forth from a secret drawer a withered rose, one of those which Ralph had given her on the night when he

told his love, and kissed it with a passionate fervour.

‘Oh, my love, my love!’ she moaned in her misery,—‘how weary I am of life without you!’





CHAPTER XXXV.

NO COMPROMISE.

HE day after her visit to Harrow, Helen entered the library, and found her parents closeted together in close conversation. It was so seldom they favoured each other with their company, that she guessed at once something unusual had happened, and asked if anything was the matter. At this question, they looked at each other as much as to say—‘Shall we tell her?’ Then, after a little pause, Mr. Vanstone spoke.

‘I have just heard that Hugh Trevor is arrived in England.’

For a moment, she did not anticipate any result from this arrival, except his own chagrin at finding that his uncle had dis-

inherited him, for she said in a tone of commiseration,—‘ Poor fellow, how disappointed he will be !’

Mrs. Vanstone broke in snappishly. ‘ I don’t care two straws for his disappointment, he should have played his cards better. A man who plays with his chances of ten thousand a-year, instead of looking after it as a cat would look after a mouse, deserves to lose it. But I hope he will confine himself to lamenting his own folly.’

‘ I do not understand you,’ said Helen, still not comprehending.

At this point, Mr. Vanstone gave the explanation in his slow, hesitating manner. ‘ Well, the fact is, my dear, I have always regarded it as a not remote possibility that Hugh Trevor might dispute his uncle’s will. My own belief is, that when the old gentleman altered his will, he was decidedly enfeebled ; and, if I thought so, it is natural that a man interested in thinking it should try to prove it. Everybody knows the uncertainty of law ; and, if he went into court to-morrow, with a strong case, there is a chance that he might fail. But on our

side, we cannot afford to lose, and if he should show fight, I hold it would be better to compromise. I have been taking your mother's advice upon the subject.'

'And what does she say?' asked the girl, with the look of one who is lost in thought. Mrs. Vanstone observed her narrowly, and was astonished to find that she did not seem greatly affected by the prospect which so terrified her parents.

'She agrees with me; and we have arranged that in such a case, we will offer Trevor to divide it.'

'That seems fair to both sides!' said Helen, gravely. 'It is hard for him to lose what he felt sure of having; it would be hard for you to part with what you have enjoyed possession of.'

Mrs. Vanstone here broke in impatiently, for she did not approve of this judicial mode of regarding one's personal interests. 'At any rate, Gabriel, I think it would be better for you to see Trew, the lawyer, without delay.'

Mr. Vanstone promised that he would do so, but he was saved the trouble, for

Mr. Trew called on him the next afternoon. This gentleman was the son of the lawyer who had made that memorable journey to Slocombe, on behalf of Michael Vanstone.

His face was grave, and Mr. Vanstone at once divined that he was the bearer of unpleasant news. When asked, he admitted as much.

‘Mr. Trevor called on me yesterday. He has only been in London four days you know,’ said the man of business. ‘We had a long interview, with the details of which I will not weary you; it is sufficient to say that he announced to me his determination to dispute Mr. Michael Vanstone’s last will.’

‘On what grounds?’ asked the other, turning very pale.

‘On the usual grounds, of course,—undue influence and unsoundness of mind.’

‘It’s an infernal lie!’ shouted poor Mr. Vanstone, goaded to desperation by his misfortunes. ‘I should as soon have thought of taking a voyage to the moon as of attempting to influence the old man in the disposition of his property; because,

from what I knew of his character, I should have judged the attempt was not worth making. I was as much astonished by the contents of that will as anybody in the room, —as Hugh Trevor himself is.'

Mr. Trew listened to his client in silence. Personally, he did not like Gabriel Vanstone; and he was, moreover, one of those cynical men of the world, who always believe the worst of everybody, and whose diabolical ingenuity enables them to put a bad construction on the most innocent speech or action.

' It is, however, my duty to tell you, that should Mr. Trevor resort to the law, as he at present threatens, you would, in my opinion, stand a poor chance. I have picked up a good deal during the last few months; and I think he will not have to go far to find plenty of evidence that when Mr. Michael Vanstone made that will, he was no more responsible for his actions than a child.'

' Then my only hope lies in a compromise,' said Gabriel.

' Quite so. When I hinted this to him yesterday, he refused to listen to it. But

he was in a violent state of passion. If we wait for a few days, he will have cooled down ; and then if you empower me to make some definite offer, he might be disposed to accept it.'

'Look here, Trew,' said Mr. Vanstone, leaning forward eagerly,—'To avoid litigation, I am prepared to give up half. It's a hard matter for both,—hard for him not to get what he expected, hard for me to give up what I have received. Make him that offer as soon as you like ; and unless the man is a confirmed idiot, he will accept it and be thankful.'

'I will do my best,' said the lawyer, rising. 'Were I in his place, I should accept it without a moment's hesitation ; but Hugh Trevor is one of the most obstinate men I know.'

So it appeared, for a week after that interview, Mr. Trevor wrote back to say that he would enter into no compromise, but carry his suit into court.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

COURTENAY'S FRIENDSHIP.

HERE was weeping and gnashing of teeth in the Vanstone household on the receipt of Trevor's inflexible reply. Helen took the matter in a calm spirit, that would have surprised anybody who was not acquainted with recent events. That brief interview with her old lover had for a time almost disqualified the girl from taking an interest in the transactions of every-day life. This reverse of fortune fell upon her with much the same effect as a blow would have upon a person recovering from a swoon. Her nervous system had been too much shaken to enable her to grasp the full meaning of what had happened.

Mrs. Vanstone 'took on,' as the common people say, in a terrible fashion. One moment she wept, another moment she raved and stormed, and called down the bitterest maledictions upon Hugh Trevor. In her fiercest paroxysms she became hysterical, and tore her hair from the roots. The thin veneer of artificial refinement with which she had overlaid her naturally coarse character, disappeared in such moments, when there was none but her family to see and hear her. Her turbulent passions shook themselves free from all control, until Helen was horrified and pained beyond measure at the spectacle. She would not have believed, a short time ago, that the direst calamity or injustice could have wrung from her mother such expressions as now issued from her lips.

'My dear, I am afraid she is going mad,' whispered poor old Vanstone to his daughter, after a more than unusually severe fit. But Helen, who had a deeper insight into character than her father, did not think so. She was compelled to own reluctantly to herself that there was a terribly common element in her mother's character. And she was better

able to recognise it now, by reason of her recent association with women of a stamp so totally different. Temper and passion are common to all classes, are certainly not the prerogative of vulgar persons, but she could not imagine Lady Grahame or Blanche Maynard, or any of her more intimate acquaintance, indulging in such language as poured in torrents from her mother's lips.

It was less painful to view her in her weeping moods. Then she would only wail out such phrases as these, 'I was born under an unlucky star; I must have been mad to think I should ever have been allowed to enjoy good fortune. I have been in the gutter all my life, and in the gutter I shall remain.' All this was very harrowing, but it was more tolerable than when she raved and stormed, and tore her hair, and invoked curses on the head of Hugh Trevor, in language which there is no necessity to transcribe.

Helen tried to comfort her; to point out that it did not follow, as a matter of course, that Trevor must gain a verdict; that, on the contrary, their chance was the better since on him must fall the onus of proving that

Michael Vanstone was of unsound mind when he altered his will. She refused to be comforted.

‘Were we ever lucky in anything we undertook, tell me that?’ was her invariable reply to her daughter’s attempts.

Lady Grahame, whose sympathy was almost equally divided between the litigants, with, perhaps, a slight balance in favour of the Vanstones, since she had grown excessively fond of Helen, sought Hugh Trevor of her own accord, and tried to induce him to accept a compromise. She pleaded very touchingly on behalf of Helen, of whose beauty and grace she drew an eloquent picture. But Mr. Trevor was not in the least shaken. He was firmly convinced that the Vanstones had taken advantage of his absence to wheedle the old man; and with this idea so firmly rooted in his mind, it was not likely that he could be brought to think kindly of any one of them. He treated Lady Grahame with the greatest politeness; but her visit did no good. Although she assured him that she had sought this interview with him voluntarily, he be-

lieved that she was in reality an emissary of his rivals ; and that such a fact showed the strength of his case and the weakness of Gabriel Vanstone's.

'All or none,' he said, firmly, as she rose to take her leave. 'This girl may be all that you describe her ; but I have daughters of my own, and why should they give place to Miss Helen Vanstone, the daughter of a spendthrift fool, who had not wit enough to keep his own fortune, but only just cunning enough to get hold of mine when my back was turned ?'

In a few days Courtenay called. Mrs. Vanstone, exhausted by one of her fits, could not receive him ; but Helen came into the drawing-room for a few moments.

'I cannot tell you how grieved I am to hear of what has happened,' he said, gravely. 'Lady Grahame has told me there is no hope of a compromise.'

'Not the least. It will have to be decided in court. I suppose it is the talk of the town ?' asked Helen.

Courtenay could not reply in the negative. Both the cousins were so well known in the

somewhat extensive world of good society, that the affair had caused quite a sensation.

‘I wish I could help you in any way,’ he said, after a pause.

Helen was beginning to realize the situation now ; and even while she was speaking to him, the tears welled into her sweet eyes, a sight which made Courtenay almost wish to cry too. He was even unjust enough to feel angry with Trevor for distressing this beautiful girl.

‘Obstinate brute !’ he cried, angrily. ‘He ought to take half, and thank his stars for that. I know, if a claimant turned up for my estates, I would sooner divide than run the risk of losing all.’

It is not probable that in such a case Courtenay would have acted as he said ; but he felt indignant, and in such a moment men talk at random.

‘But you will promise to employ me if I can be of any service in any way,’ he urged, as he held out his hand in leave-taking. ‘Your father seems very enfeebled in health, and there must be many things in which a

young and vigorous man like myself can save him trouble.'

She was touched by his ardent desire to serve her, thinly veiled under the pretence of sympathy with the family.

'You are very kind, and, believe me, I am grateful,' she answered, in a faltering voice. 'You have most generously complied with my request to be a sincere friend, and in such a calamity as this, a sincere friend is of inestimable value. I do not know of anything at present that I could ask you to do for us, but I will not forget your kind offer.'

'I shall think you are treating me very ungraciously if you do.' And after this arrangement had been entered into, he made no scruple of calling frequently at the house, to see if he could be of use. As the time for the trial drew near, he worked a great deal in their cause,—suggested points for consideration of counsel, helped to hunt up witnesses, and behaved in every way like a warm-hearted friend.

And here we must leave the Vanstones for a moment to return to Ralph Weldon. He had told Helen that his meeting with her

would render his new home as void of peace as was the old ; but, after the first shock had worn off, he could not honestly own to himself that such was the case. Can the reader guess the reason ? When he returned home on the night of that fruitless interview in the garden of Thomas Street, he felt doubtful of her faith. In spite of her tears and protestations, he believed that they thinly veiled a reluctance to renounce for his sake the bright and tempting world, to enter which she had so long and ardently pined.

But in this second brief interview, that dishonouring doubt had been swept away. He had it from her own lips that she would preserve her faith to him by refusing any and every future offer. It was well known among those who collect gossip that Granville Courtenay had haunted her like her shadow ; the rumour had even gone forth that they were engaged,—and it was that rumour which had driven him once more into her presence. She had denied this in the most emphatic language. Did the refusal of so eligible a suitor prove or disprove the existence of that ambition to

which he believed he had chiefly owed his misery? His reason and common sense could return but one answer to such a question. She was weak,—wanting in character and firmness perhaps, imbued with false notions of duty,—but she was no willing traitress.

And this knowledge brought to his heart a strange peace. It was decreed that the separate currents of their lives could never mingle; but although forced apart by the action of another, her heart was still his, as his still belonged to her. In the midst of those gay and brilliant scenes which now formed the panorama of her life, he would not be forgotten. The honeyed words of accomplished flatterers would fall idly upon the ears that had listened to his own ardent story of love. He took the portrait of her which he had painted from its hiding-place, and put it in his chamber.

‘I can bear to look upon you now, my darling, for I know you are still my own dear love,’ he murmured softly to himself. ‘I can mourn you as I could have done had you died in those short but rapturous days—

dead, dead, alas to me now, but unprofaned by the touch or the kiss of another !'

He shut himself up in his studio, and worked unceasingly. He felt that he lived now only for his beloved Art, and for that equally beloved memory. The rumour of the approaching trial did not, therefore, reach him in that quiet home, and the first he learned of it was from one of the weekly journals of gossip and scandal. His eye dilated, his cheek grew scarlet, his hand trembled as he read the paragraph. He rushed into his sister's studio.

' Listen to this paragraph, Clara,' he cried eagerly. "The case of 'Trevor *versus* Vanstone' will be on next week. Mr. Trevor disputes his uncle's will, on the usual grounds of unsoundness of mind and undue influence. The sum in question is certainly worth a hard fight, being over two hundred thousand. The affair has created a great sensation in consequence of Mr. Trevor being so well known in connection with science and exploration, while the lovely daughter of his opponent is a familiar figure in the fashionable world."

‘Who shall say that there is no retribution in the world after reading this?’ he cried, in the same excited tone. ‘The wealth that enabled those sordid traffickers in their daughter’s beauty to filch her from me, and carry her like a slave to the marriage market, --see what a short time has flown, and their possession of it is menaced.’

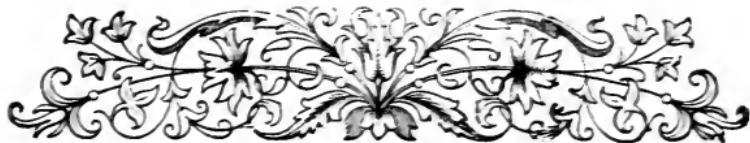
‘But it does not follow that the trial will go against them,’ observed Clara.

‘However it ends, I shall have had some revenge for the wrong they inflicted upon me. Do you think that feeble old man and his heartless wife are not undergoing torments at this moment? Do you think that they can take comfort from the hope that it may be decided in their favour? No—Poverty has again become their hated companion, stares grimly in their faces by day, and sits by their pillow at night. Those who are menaced by the loss of that on which they have set their hearts always anticipate the worst.’

He was silent for a moment, and Clara did not answer him. In his present excited mood, she saw that to argue would only

irritate him. At length he said—‘I shall go to this trial. After all I have suffered, it will be some relief to me to watch the despair upon the face of the woman who wrought my misery. You look at me wonderingly, Clara! you think these are not Christian sentiments! Perhaps they are not, but I inherit my mother’s nature both in love and hate. She never forgave the hand that struck her a deadly blow, and I have the same unforgiving spirit!’





CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RIVAL CLAIMANTS.

TO the casual visitor a Court of Justice is but a dreary and dingy place, presenting few features of interest, save in the exceptional instance of some *cause célèbre*, in which highly-seasoned private scandals are served up with a sauce *piquante* enough to titillate the public palate. Laughing youth, as it flashes for a moment its sunny presence on the dull walls, and gazes around with an eye that only seeks the humorous, smiles at the antiquated costumes, the solemnity not wholly devoid of the ridiculous, and turns what it looks upon into materials for merry jests.

And yet a man who has stood here but for a short time can take away food enough for

thought if he so desires. This small Court, with its somewhat repellent adjuncts, is after all a theatre on which human passions are represented with a strength and force that find few parallels on the mimic stage. The emotions that find vent in loud-lunged declamation and counterfeited tears prove to the melting audience how perfectly art can interpret nature; but here you shall see them expressed as no actor ever yet expressed them, on the face of the baffled suitor who has just been made a beggar.

Art can never give you a picture like this. Watch the muscles of the face, the nervous twitching of his mouth, the tremor of his hands, as he slowly gathers up his papers. Baffled for a time, hope still sits enthroned in his heart; and the wild glances he flings around him are full of defiance. He scorns alike the forensic jargon by which he has been assailed, the ruling of the judge, the convictions of the jury. Defeat has made him more resolute. With subtler pleadings, more weighty precedents, the missing links of his evidence supplied, he will again return to the conflict; the completeness of his claim

will silence the sophistry of the pleader, and the triumphant litigant of to-day, who has snatched a verdict from an exhausted judge and a bewildered jury ; will live to meditate on the glorious uncertainty of the law and the fluctuating decisions of justice.

A sad enough place by virtue of its sad functions. For in this narrow spot, under the gaze of the public eye, the ties of love and kindred, and the relations of men to each other, are cruelly rent asunder, as if they had never been. And now and again, as the popular instinct revolts against some unjust verdict, some harsh decree, the limits of decorum are overstepped, and these sombre walls echo to the angry cries of disapproval.

Hither come those who, a few short years ago, thought love had turned the world into a second Eden, and who are now grown so hateful to each other that the harsh mouth of the law must speak the word which divides those whom God formerly made one. Hither come those over whose pillow the same mother once breathed her nightly blessing, now turned into bitter and unnatural foes by the curse of a disputed inheritance. Hither

come the usurer and his victim, the scion of some noble house, who passes his days in riot and debauchery, and who, to gratify his vices, has pledged his patrimony and dis-honoured his name. Hither flock in desperate numbers the wronged and the wrongdoers, the cheating and the cheated, the dupe and the swindler. And last and saddest spectacle of all, comes that terrible residuum—the ‘criminal class,’ the pariahs and outcasts of the modern world, forming the chief foundation on which the tribunals of justice are reared, and composed of a community of wicked men and shameless women eternally crossing and re-crossing the threshold of public justice. For these unhappy beings, whose crimes have forfeited God’s gift of life, the law reserves its last dread penalty.

There were hearts in that Court to-day to whom the verdict of these twelve jurymen would bring emotions varying in their nature and origin, but similar in intensity. Fore-most among those to be affected by it, second perhaps in this respect only to the litigants themselves, were Ralph Weldon and his sister. His keen glance fastened upon

a tall, stately-looking barrister, who from time to time conversed in whispers with Gabriel Vanstone.

He turned to his sister with a sarcastic smile.

‘Do you see that man with the hooked beak, Clara? He seems to me the beau-ideal of a forensic gladiator. Within the four corners of his brief he can shelter the most desperate villain in the world. When he turns over his pages you will listen to an epitome of legal precepts,—the beginning of his onslaught. Like a skilful engineer, investing the fortress of the enemy,—he will form his lines of contravallation and circumvallation, and, while pushing the siege with vigour, keep vigilant watch on the approach of the succouring army.’

At that moment Granville Courtenay joined Mr. Vanstone, and Ralph’s gaze grew sterner as he gazed upon this man, whom rumour had so long assigned for his rival. He had hoped to see Mrs. Vanstone in Court, and had promised himself a not unnatural revenge in watching her anxiety. But he was doomed to disappointment.

Neither mother nor daughter could summon courage enough to watch the progress of the trial, on the result of which so much was at stake.

‘*TREVOR versus VANSTONE!*’ The babble of tongues ceased. All eyes were turned towards the scene of action; and amidst a profound silence, Sir Wilkins Smooth, the counsel for Hugh Trevor, rose on his feet. Sir Wilkins was a fluent, plausible speaker, who had so insinuating a way of putting his arguments, as if in stating them he were making an appeal to your common sense, that timid jurymen felt themselves compelled to agree with him.

The facts of the case, according to Sir Wilkins, were these. The late Mr. Michael Vanstone, whose testamentary intentions were the subject of the present action, was a gentleman of considerable wealth: in a word, the verdict of the jury would settle the right to the future possession of two hundred thousand pounds. This, he need hardly say, was a large sum to be deprived of; and when he came to prove to them beyond all reasonable doubt that his client, Mr. Hugh Trevor,

had been deprived of this splendid inheritance by means and through causes radically unjust, he felt convinced that they would, without a moment's hesitation, repair the wrong that had been done.

It would be necessary to go briefly into the history of the plaintiff, whose name, in connection with scientific research, was doubtless familiar to everybody in that Court. Mr. Hugh Trevor was the late Mr. Vanstone's nephew, and had been adopted by his uncle at the age of ten years. From that date until the discovery of this last will, he had been brought up in the knowledge that he was Mr. Vanstone's heir. His uncle had required him to enter no profession, had made him a handsome allowance, had, in a word, treated him as rich men treat those to whom they are going to leave their money. Mr. Vanstone had made three or four wills since he had adopted his nephew, but they only differed in the amount or number of certain small legacies. But in each one, the great bulk of his property was left to Mr. Trevor.

He should now call the attention of the

jury to the last will but one, made five years before the testator's death, and which, he was prepared to contend, was the only true and genuine expression of his real wishes, since the last instrument was executed at a time when the old gentleman's faculties were completely enfeebled, when, in fact, he was in a state of imbecility. This will, then, to which he now directed their attention, left his client heir to the sum of two hundred thousand pounds—next in the magnitude of the sum bequeathed came the present defendant, Mr. Gabriel Vanstone, who received ten thousand. There were other small legacies to friends, servants, etc., which had nothing to do with the case, and into which he should, therefore, not enter. There was no concealment about this document; it was shown to Mr. Trevor, and, as was natural, he expressed his gratitude for his uncle's affectionate treatment of him.

He would now come to what might be called the transition period in the testator's faculties. A year before his death, Mr. Trevor had a strong desire to proceed to Africa, for purposes connected with explora-

tion. He was, however, reluctant to quit his relative, who was now at the advanced age of eighty, and who might die before he returned. But Mr. Vanstone having, like many hearty old gentlemen, a firm belief in his own powers, overruled his hesitation, and sent him away, so to speak, with his blessing.

After Mr. Trevor's departure, it was observed that the defendant's visits to his relative became much more frequent. What transpired in those private interviews between nephew and uncle, nobody of course could pretend to state positively; one could only give a shrewd guess from the results that followed. Six months after the date on which Mr. Vanstone had dismissed Mr. Hugh Trevor, with every appearance of goodwill, to the shores of Africa, there began to issue from him complaints which were both absurd and unjust. He let fall expressions which intimated that he considered he was being neglected and treated ungratefully by the man who owed everything in the past and future to his generosity.

This might, Sir Wilkins argued, be thought the querulousness of age, but it was more likely to be the outcome of the suggestions and insinuations of others, than the result of his own unaided reflections on the subject. It would be easy enough for a third person to hint that Mr. Trevor, in availing himself of his uncle's permission to leave him, had acted ungratefully and cruelly—had been endeavouring to mask his own callousness behind the veil of a generous and unsuspicuous sanction. However this might be, one fact was certain. Ten days before his death, Mr. Michael Vanstone copied out the last will with his own hand, making in it only one alteration, and that a most vital one, namely, the substitution of the name of Gabriel Vanstone for that of Hugh Trevor, and the name of Hugh Trevor for that of Gabriel Vanstone. The result was that Mr. Vanstone came into the possession of two hundred thousand pounds, while his client was compensated for his blasted hopes by a legacy of ten thousand. They might guess Mr. Trevor's astonishment when, on arriving fresh from his exploits in Africa, he

learned of this sudden reversion of fortune. But knowing his uncle's affection so well, he could not believe that he was in his right mind when he made this fatal alteration. He instituted enquiries ; he collected overwhelming evidence in corroboration of his view, and that evidence he would now place before them.

Joseph Jones was called, and deposed that he had been in the service of the late Mr. Vanstone over twenty years as butler. The examination then proceeded as follows :—

Sir Wilkins.—‘Your master treated you with the confidence that one reposes in a tried and trusted servant, did he not ?’

Jones.—‘I may say he did, sir.’

Sir W.—‘Living so many years with him, you were enabled to form an opinion as to his affection for Mr. Trevor ?’

Jones.—‘I was able to do so, sir ?’

Sir W.—‘Be kind enough to tell us what that opinion was, Mr. Jones.’

Jones.—‘Well, sir, I can't express what Mr. Vanstone felt for him better than by quoting what my wife used to say about it.

“Mr. Trevor,” she would often say to me, “is the apple of the old gentleman’s eye.”’
(Laughter.)

Sir W. (blandly).—‘A very forcible and accurate definition. Well, now, Mr. Jones, I want to know when it was that you first began to notice certain symptoms about your master which gave you the idea that his faculties of mind were going.’

Jones.—‘Between three and four months before his death. He talked a great deal to himself, wandered off from one subject to another when he spoke with me, and took odd fancies.’

Sir W..—‘Can you describe any of these fancies?’

Jones.—‘He happened to be taken poorly after dinner one day, and then he took it into his head that he had been poisoned. He called me in, and locking the door, said,—“Jones, I believe something has been put into my food; in future, I shall want you to taste every dish that I partake of.” I tried to argue him out of it as far as I could, but he stuck fast to his own idea, and for a week afterwards I tasted every dish first. Well,

that fancy wore away then, but it came on again three weeks before his death.'

Sir W.—'Now tell us about the making of the will.'

Jones.—'Ten days before he died he called me into his room, and pointing to some sheets of paper on the table, said, "Jones, I have been drawing up a new will, and I want you and Connor (that was the valet) to witness it." I said, "Very good, sir;" and was going to fetch Connor, when he stopped me with—"I am going to disinherit Mr. Trevor, and make Mr. Vanstone my heir instead." My answer was—"I am very sorry for it, sir; for Mr. Trevor has always been led to suppose that you would leave him your money, and it will be a terrible blow to him." He said to that—"I am sorry too, Jones; but Mr. Trevor is very callous and selfish, and has behaved ungratefully to me." Of course, I did not dare to say more; but I thought, from the way in which he entered into it with me, that he could not be in his right mind, and when Connor came in, he thought so too.'

Mr. Jones gave a mass of other evidence,

all tending to show that for some period prior to his death Michael Vanstone was not responsible for his actions. The judge and some of the jury having asked him a few questions, Mr. Sharp, Q.C., the ablest cross-examiner at the bar, rose and tackled him. The main facts elicited by Mr. Sharp were that Mr. Trevor had always fee'd him liberally, while Mr. Vanstone had been singularly niggardly in the matter of gratuities. After much badgering, Jones also admitted that he had kept his tongue quiet in the presence of Trew, the lawyer, although it was natural that he should have communicated his suspicions to him. 'To put it in a nutshell,' concluded Mr. Sharp, with a knowing glance at the jury, 'it was only when Mr. Trevor's gold found its way into your pocket that you began to ransack the dusty chambers of your memory!'

Having slightly confused his witness by this sneering comment, Mr. Sharp followed up his advantage by asking the witness if he did not consider that Mr. Vanstone was perfectly justified in feeling hurt at his nephew's leaving him to die among strangers. To

this question the butler returned doggedly that he did not know. Then ensued the usual badgering that goes on between a pertinacious counsel and a sullen witness. Was it difficult for Mr. Jones to form an opinion upon such a case ? Let him put Mr. Trevor and his fees out of his mind for a moment, and place himself in the position of his old master, abandoned in his extreme old age by a nephew whom he had treated with a lavish generosity. Thus, bullied and tormented, Jones was at length constrained to admit that Michael Vanstone's indignation was neither unnatural nor unjust. ' But, all the same, the old gentleman wasn't in his right mind when he made that will,' added the man doggedly, as he prepared to descend from the witness box. There was slight laughter in court at this voluntary statement, and Mr. Sharp frowned.

' You have given us your opinion upon that matter already,' said the learned gentleman, with affected nonchalance.

The valet was then called ; and his evidence was more damaging than that of his fellow servant. The nature of his duties

having permitted him to see so much more of his master than anybody else, he was able to pour forth a quantity of details that tended to prove the old gentleman was far from being in his right mind at this period. Sharp cross-examined with his usual ability, —sneered, bullied, and commented with his usual acerbity, elicited that Mr. Trevor had been as generous towards this witness as towards Jones ; but he could not shake his evidence, and he saw, with concern, that the jury were getting impressed.

Two other witnesses were called, old friends of Michael Vanstone, who had happened to see him during the disputed period. Both these gentlemen gave damaging evidence. In his separate conversations with them, the old men had shown very decided symptoms of mental feebleness, such as misunderstanding what they said, talking to himself of other matters while they addressed him. Sharp did his best with these ; but, as they were gentlemen, he had to preserve a certain show of politeness. But he was not very successful. They had no particular interest either way, were old friends of Mr. Vanstone, but knew very

little of Hugh Trevor; would have preferred, perhaps, that Hugh Trevor should have had his uncle's money, as he had been brought up to expect it. Out of these candid admissions, Mr. Sharp could not extract much.

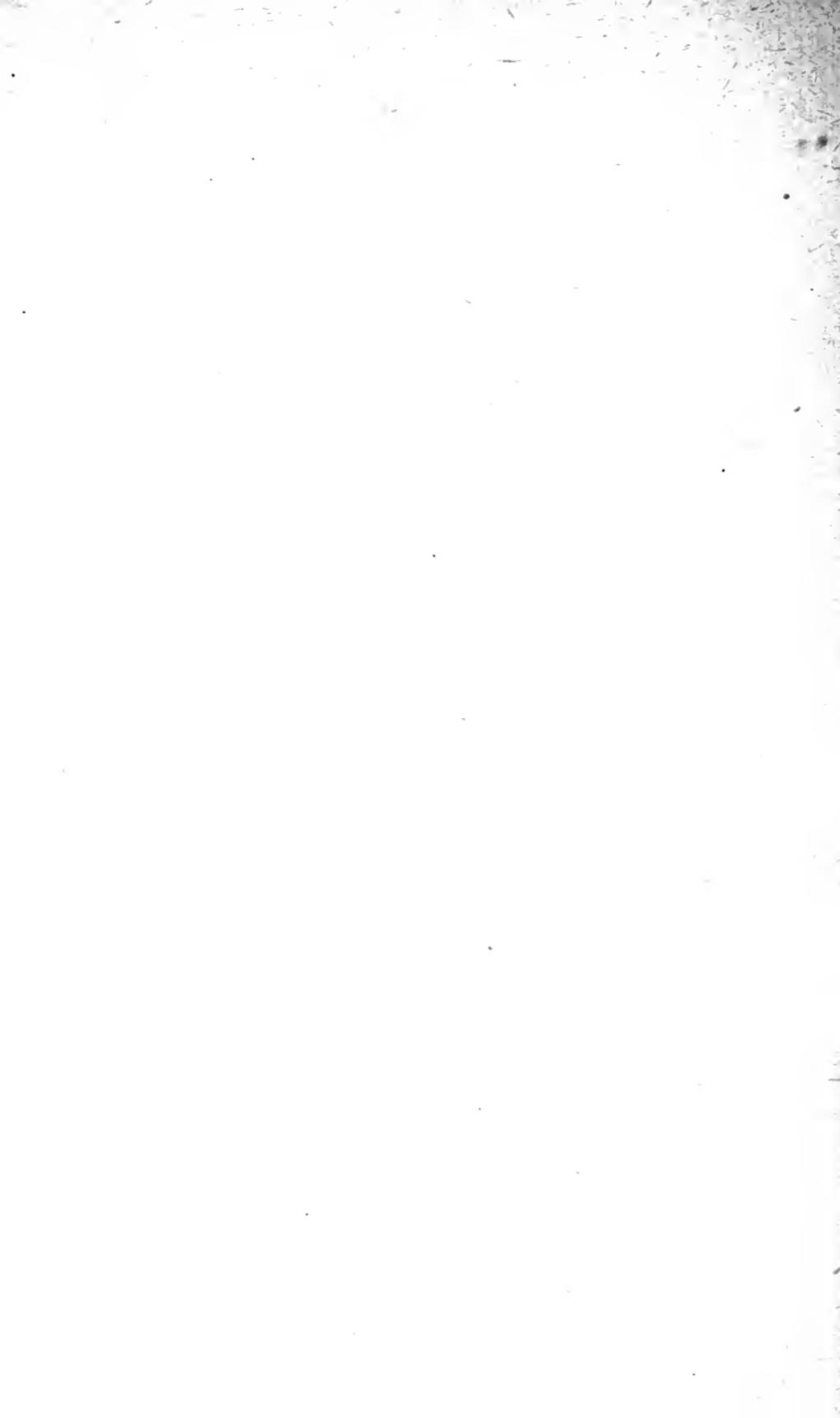
That closed the case for the plaintiff, and poor Mr. Vanstone's face was very long. 'The evidence is all one way,' he whispered to Trew, the lawyer.

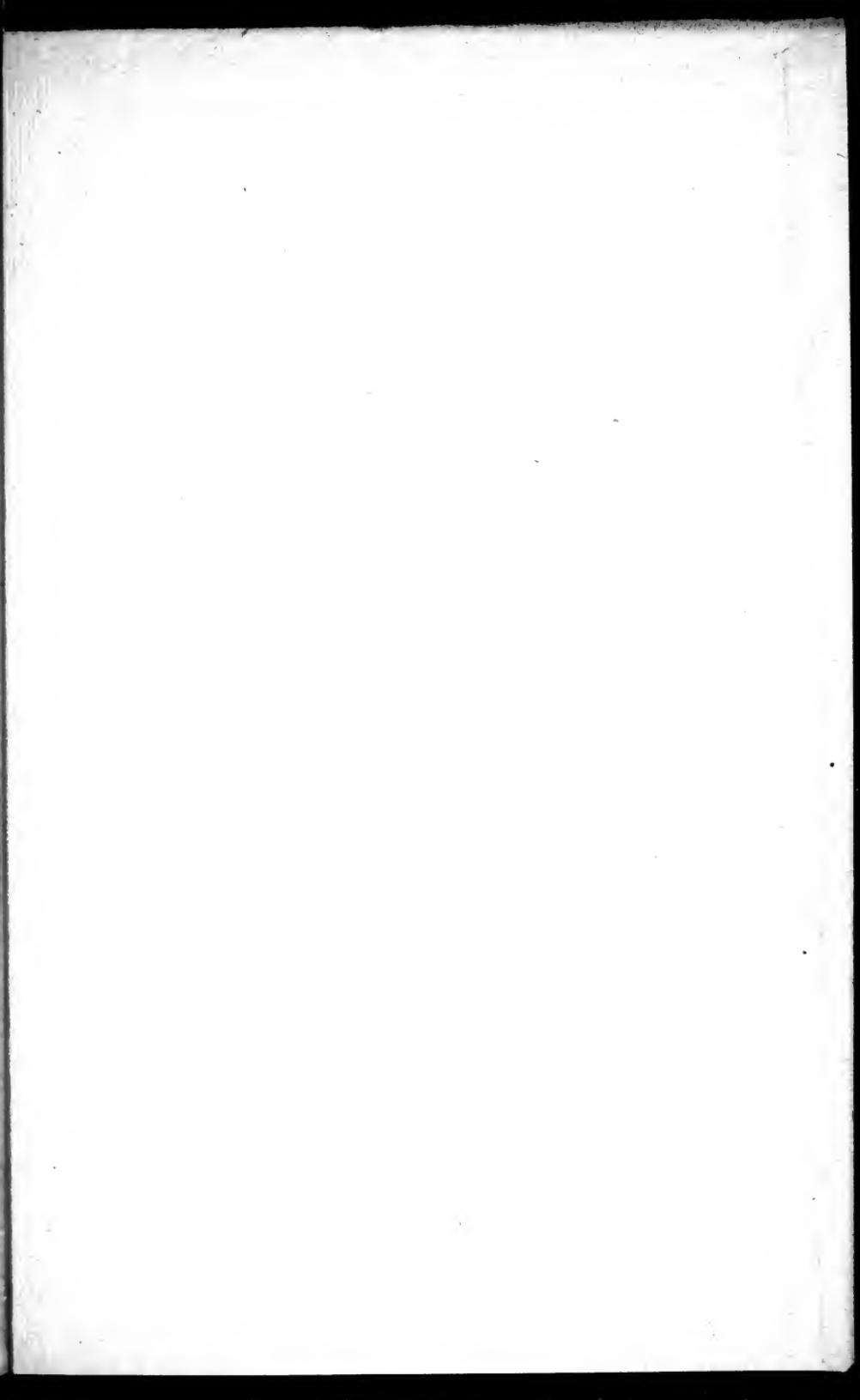
'I was afraid it would be,' replied that gentleman, coolly; adding—'Your only hope now lies in Sharp's reply. Unfortunately, the judge has the last word to the jury; and he has formed his opinion long ago, unless I am mistaken.'

The miserable man wiped the perspiration from his brow; and Ralph Weldon noted this significant action with a vindictive smile. The Court now rose, and the audience passed out.

END OF VOL. II.







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